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FIFTEEN

AUG.



WESTERN

15
STORIES

TALES

25
CENTS



A STORY OF
DEATH-BAITED TRAILS

FAST MAN- LAST MAN

by **WILLIAM R. COX**

AL STORM • NORMAN A. FOX
GIFF CHESHIRE MANY OTHERS

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D-FROST-O MATIC

Women won't let you take it out!



**REVOLUTIONARY NEW DEVICE PAYS YOU \$5⁰⁰ AND MORE EACH
AS HOUSEWIVES END HAND DEFROSTING FOREVER!
Patented Features Make Selling Easy!**



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- Special single cord—no tangling wires.
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- Guaranteed two full years.
- Fully adjustable—one to six hour defrost time.
- Beautifully finished.
- Exclusive Skip-Defrost.
- Nationally Advertised.

GUARANTEED 2 WAYS

Guaranteed to customer for at least two years.

Guaranteed to YOU—Must sell or YOUR MONEY BACK!

Our Guarantee backed by the largest, finest manufacturer of its type in the world.

**D-FROST-O
MATIC**

29 MILLION PROSPECTS!!!!

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29,000,000 prospects eager to buy!

Great AUTOMATIC unit converts ANY electric refrigerator to the new-self-defrosting type!



End This Forever!

DRAMATIC DEMONSTRATION!

Simply **PLUG IN**. Demonstrates itself! Once housewives see how "magically" D-Frost-O-Matic saves time—saves food—saves money—they **WON'T LET YOU TAKE IT OUT!** It defrosts **EVERY NIGHT**—automatically. No more ice-crusts coils—sloppy kitchen or spoiling food.

Rush coupon today for **FREE** information about amazing Sure Selling Plan. Easy as making a phone call—clicks with 87 out of 100 prospects in homes, apartments, hospitals. **WE SHOW YOU HOW TO MAKE THE BIGGEST MONEY OF YOUR LIFE.**

JOIN THESE MEN FOR EXCEPTIONAL PROFITS WEEKLY!

Received demonstrator today and sold five units first day out.

James W. Little

Rush me 20 more D-Frost-O-Matics. Customers are calling at my home for them.

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John C. West

Sold first 6 D-Frost-O-Matics in 2 hours. Had no previous experience. It's wonderful.

Leon B. Davis

I sold 19 out of first 20 calls. D-Frost-O-Matic is finest appliance I ever handled.

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Act now—territories going fast

D-Frost-O-Matic Corp.

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Chicago, Illinois

RUSH COUPON NOW!

D-Frost-O-Matic Corp.
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Rush me full information on making biggest money of my life with D-Frost-O-Matic, using your amazing Automatic Selling Plan.

Name

Address

Town..... State.....

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FULL OR SPARE
TIME!**

Easy to Sell...

**AIR-CUSHIONED FROM HEEL TO TOE...
MAKE MONEY
FROM THE FIRST
HOUR!**

**FREE SELLING
OUTFIT**

Call on folks all around you—show and sell amazing **NEW KIND OF SHOE!** Hidden elastic in front makes it easy to **SLIP-OFF**... no more broken laces or wrinkled tongues! And Built-in **EXCLUSIVE Velvet-eez Air Cushioned Insole** from heel to toe gives buoyant arch support on resilient, soothing-soft foam rubber!

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You can please almost everyone with our more than 150 styles of dress, sport, work shoes for men and women! Fit them **CORRECTLY** with easy, accurate methods. Draw on stock far bigger than customers could find in **MANY** stores combined. **WE SHOW YOU HOW** to fit, sell, build your business!

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SLIP OFF!**



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Women everywhere know and trust the Good Housekeeping Seal on Velvet-eez shoes. Neither you nor your customers can lose—and you have everything to gain.

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Name

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Dept. M-680, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOLUME 22, No. 3



AUGUST, 1950

Three Big Novels

1. **A GUN FOR JOHNNY REB.**.....*George C. Appell* 10
Forgotten, they rode once more, swearing an undying oath, "When we meet again, *amigo*—my grave is yours!"
2. **I'LL SLUG MY WAY TO HELL!**.....*Frank Bonham* 32
"Mister, there's only one way to settle who'll run this town . . . an' that's the gun way!"
3. **TERROR AT TIMBERLINE.**.....*M. Howard Lane* 106
Johnny's flaming sixes blasted their own answer to a dead man's quest!

Smashing Short Western Fiction

4. **FAST TRIGGER MAN.**.....*Norman A. Fox* 25
"There's one thing you need to make you the kind of lawman I like, and here it is—a bullet!"
5. **THIS KILL IS MINE.**.....*Garold Hartsock* 56
"All I want, gents," the kid said, "is one last laugh—on the other side of hell!"
6. **FAST MAN—LAST MAN.**.....*William R. Cox* 67
A gent who'll die for peace—will also kill for it!
7. **DEAD MAN'S RUN.**.....*W. Edmunds Claussen* 76
Night bullets sang of their final ride—the hell-bent six on a lawforsaken trail!
8. **GUN NAME.**.....*Al Storm* 85
Give a man a gun name—and he's likely to carve it on a better man's bullet!
9. **HELL-RIM ROUNDUP.**.....*Lewis B. Patten* 91
A rope is an honest man's life, a rustler's death—and a fast man's final judge!
10. **BLIND BULLET.**.....*Ray Gaulden* 96
The slow die sudden . . . but the quick die hard!
11. **TURNBACK TRAIL.**.....*Giff Cheshire* 99
Living right is harder than dying right, Orcott found, for to him it meant fighting to the death for the things he hated most!

Departments and Features

12. **ON THE TRAIL.**..... Law of the gun and bottle*The Editors* 6
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On The Trail

IT'S TIME once again for our regular session at trailside, gents, when we take up matters Western and palaver some about the people that made up that fabulous section of the country.

Just by being themselves, which means a little more than human in most cases and a little less in a few, the giants of the Old West built a country and some of our proudest traditions. This space in each issue is yours, to tell your fellow readers those stories of the time that you know about, and to hear what they have to say on the subject. So if any of you gents have a story of the West that you'd like to share, send it along. Like these:

Dear Editor:

Never to be forgotten in the story of California is the record of its first duly elected governing body.

This august assemblage was popularly known as "The Legislature of a Thousand Drinks," and all the drinks were on the house. Trouble was, many of them never were served.

(Continued on page 8)

They Never Knew It Was SO EASY To Play

*Thousands Now Play Popular Songs
Who Didn't Know a Note of Music Before*

**You, too, can learn your favorite
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a teacher, this quick,
easy, money-saving way**

THINK of the fun YOU are missing! The popularity, friendship, good times! Why? Because you think it's *hard* to learn music. You have an idea that it's a slow, tedious task, with lots of boring drills and exercises.

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Sound interesting? Well, just name the instrument you'd like to play and we'll prove you **CAN!** (Instruments supplied when needed, Cash or Credit.) Mail the coupon or write. Do it now!

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Invited to Parties. "Before I took your course I didn't know one note of music. Then three months later I started to play for dances. I've been invited to many parties. The course is easy and interesting."
*R. M. Vancouver, B. C.



Well Worth Money. "The course is fully self explanatory. When one is finished with it there is little one need learn. It is well worth the money and I fully believe you have the finest course on the market today."
*R. E. School, *F. H. Athol, G., Clarksburg, W. Va. Kans.



Learned Quickly at Home. "I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time."
*H. C. S., Calif.



Surprised Friends. "People who hear me play don't understand how I do it. They ask if I haven't had lessons from a teacher. To their surprise they find I haven't. I'm glad to be a student of your school."
*F. H. Athol, G., Clarksburg, W. Va. Kans.



Music is the magic key to friendship, fun, romance. The person who can play a musical instrument is always sure of a welcome. Why not let music open up a new world for you. Thousands have discovered unexpected pleasure and profit in music, thanks to the unique method that makes it amazingly easy to learn.

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Print and Picture Sample**

See for yourself how this wonderful self-instruction method works. Sit down, in the privacy of your own home, with the interesting illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home." No salesman will call—decide for yourself whether you want to play this easy way.—52nd year.



U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
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GO ANY PLACE
ANY MORE?

CAN'T HELP IT, DEAR.
WHEN A FORD HAS AS
MANY MILES AND
YEARS ON IT AS
OURS HAS, IT NEEDS
REPOWERING



I FIGURE THERE'S
NO SENSE IN NOT
GETTING THE BEST—
THAT'S WHY I CAME
HERE TO GET AN
AUTHORIZED
RECONDITIONED
ENGINE FOR MY
FORD

YOU'RE RIGHT! IT'S
RISKY NOT GETTING
THE GENUINE ARTICLE.
IT'S LOW-PRICED AND
WE CAN WORK OUT AN
EASY PAYMENT PLAN
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DAVE, IT RUNS LIKE
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 6)

One of the first motions passed by the members was a daily wage for themselves of twenty-five dollars, for sitting. Moving came higher—their traveling expenses were reckoned at twenty-five dollars a mile. To one of their number, a visionary engineer named Dr. Oliver Wozencraft, they made a gift of ten million acres in the Colorado Desert, with the understanding that he was to turn it green.

Unfortunately, many members never collected on their fabulous expense accounts, and their descendants, in some cases, are still suing for the balance. As for Dr. Wozencraft, he died in Washington of old age, while a bewildered U. S. Congress debated the constitutionality of California's amazing grant of desert land.

And the desert still was white.

Ben Ames
Reno, Nevada

Chivalry never exactly died in the Old West, but sometimes it was a little short of breath:

Dear Editor:

The chivalry of the Old West—and of the Old South too, for that matter—takes a black eye in the saga of Charley Harrison, who was finally lost from sight among the Confederate guerilla forces during the Civil War.

Taking up residence in Denver, where he made his living as a gambler, Charley soon was known as the surest shot in town. He disliked wild gunplay, and discouraged it by shooting dead on sight those who indulged. His admirers claimed that he always called a warning before pulling the trigger—but Charley himself claimed that there was a jury waiting to try him in hell for his crimes.

He knew who would sit on the jury, too—he remembered them by the fourteen notches on his gun, eleven on the right side, and three on the left. The three on the left, he explained, would only count as one in the hereafter—they had never been very important, even in life.

They merely were women.

Harley Smith
West Caulfield, Idaho

That brings us to the end of the trail for this issue, gents. We'll be seeing you next time, though, and between sessions of *On The Trail*, we'd enjoy hearing from you. *Adios!*

—THE EDITORS

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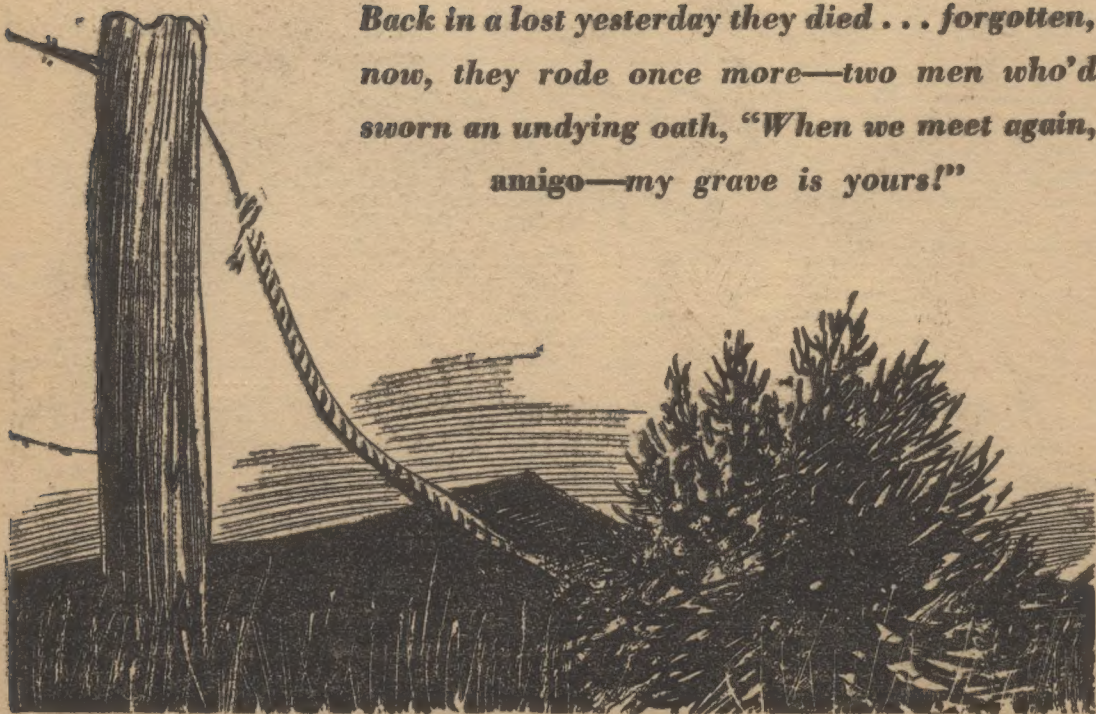
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A GUN FOR JOHNNY REB

*Back in a lost yesterday they died . . . forgotten,
now, they rode once more—two men who'd
sworn an undying oath, "When we meet again,
amigo—my grave is yours!"*



CHAPTER ONE

The Hunter Rides

JOHN SINGLETON HUMFRIES rode slowly north up the prairie into the growing storm, fearing it as he would fear an avalanche of whip-lashing

demons, for the growl and thump of thunder could fray his nerves raw, and he knew that before dark it would. For he had just left a storm behind him—a month be-

His right sent Daw
back. . . .



hind him, five hundred hoof miles behind—and it had been a storm greater and longer than any the heavens could spill, and the seeds of its blood-wetness had sprouted in scores of military cemeteries up and down the land and it had ended only with the dolorous brass sob of the trumpets at Appomattox calling men back to the plow.

John Humfries had gone through almost four years of it before he'd been hit near Rafter's Run, toward the end; and on that day thunder had been in every man's ears and flames were reaching for trees with darting crimson fingers as the force of the exploding ammunition train had turned the attack into a rout and sent both Blue and Gray scattering in reasonless fear.

And Humfries had lain rolling in the mud with his mangled knee pulled up tight into his belly while the name he would never forget rang through his ears. "Daw! Luh-tenant Daw! We kin saber 'em where they fall!"

But Lieutenant Daw—whoever he was—had not sabered anyone where he fell, and Humfries had guessed that the man was as scared as anyone else. Humfries had gotten a glimpse of that face through the smoke—sooted and laced with sweat trickles, but lean and blond and having wide-set eye sockets on each side of a high-arched nose. It was not easy to forget such a face, especially if it has been following you for five hundred hoof miles.

Humfries reined in as lightning trickled down the purpling skies and slammed into the prairie to westward. The thunder came again, and he had to fight panic. It lanced up through the worn curtain of his self control and made him shake. He faced around away from it and studied the darkening land behind him, but no rider disturbed its drear face; even the burnt summer grasses were motionless, as if in horror at the elemental upheaval that would collapse on them before night. The thun-

der tumbled into the east and was gone.

Humfries put himself north again, talking to his horse, talking to himself. The horse could take it, the horse still had the letters US branded into its left forefoot. The horse was used to it by now, but John Humfries never would be. And he was only twenty-eight.

He wondered how far Craik's was.

Corman Craik, they'd told him in hospital. You go to Corman Craik's place up beyond the dry fork of the Paradise, and he might sign you on. Not particular, Craik. Wouldn't balk at a gimp leg or anything like that. But don't ask him questions, 'cause he ain't goin' to reply.

"How about the Queen brand?" Humfries had wanted to know.

No, not the Queen. The Queen was too big, it needed—well, you understand, suh—able-bodied riders. Try Craik, though...

The steel arch of the western skies whitened and went black, and Humfries braced himself. "Steady, now, it won't get you." It came at him like canister shot and racked his ears and exploded away into the east; and it uncorked the rains.

They slapped loosely at first, gathered strength on a rising wind and came together to drum into the earth and all that was on it in a monotonous, hissing wash. Humfries rode steadily through it, guiding on a clump of cottonwoods that marked a stream. It would be the south fork of the upper reaches of the Paradise, he figured, and therefore he couldn't be too far from Craik's. For a hideous moment he imagined that Daw would be crouched in the cottonwoods waiting for an old enemy to trot up. Waiting to balance books that had been tilted at Rafter's Run in the blast of ammunition wagons. Crouching to settle a score that could have been settled with a saber short weeks before. Daw might have ridden around him and come into the cottonwoods that afternoon.

Humfries loosened his gun, but he didn't draw it. He folded back the dripping,

smoke-stained brim of his hat and kept one hand on the gun and put his horse directly at the cottonwoods. They resembled shivering old hags huddled in a haunted room.

He put his horse right into the hags and snagged out his gun and jumped off and whirled this way and that, staggering somewhat on the still-unknit cartilage of his left leg. But Daw was not there, no one was there. Only John Singleton Humfries and his horse and his fears.

He felt foolish.

He chuckled a bit as he cared for the horse and rigged a saddle tarp over some boughs and spread a groundsheet. The groundsheet bore the faded legend, "Sanitary Corps, USA," on one corner.

He decided not to start a fire. He could have, easily enough; he could have dug a pit under the tarp and got a fire going and warmed his muscles and maybe set down some coffee. But a fire, inevitably, would have attracted attention, and he craved no attention from Daw.

Daw's out to kill me, why else did he track me for five hundred miles? Why doesn't he call it, make a stand, offer up? Why don't I ambush him and call his hand? Why? 'Cause I need to get to Craik's.

"Corman Craik." He spoke the words, and unaccountably the heft of his hand gun felt good to him. There was no reason in the world why the sound of that name should make his gun feel good, but it did. He said it again, and flipped out the cylinder and saw to the loading and flipped it back again. And he sensed a shameful unrest of soul at the realization that here sat John Humfries, once top rider for the Silver W brand, on his way to plead for work with a man whose name was spoken in whispers and who did not answer questions put squarely to him.

But the Silver W brand was a charred shambles and old Silverlock Walsh himself was long gone in the vortexes that

form the back-eddies of war and there was no stock out that way and the big trail drives from the Dalles passed east of where it had been. The only hoofmarks on the old Silver W range would be those left by the 7th Michigan and the Colorado Volunteers and the Kansas Irregulars.

SO IT would have to be Craik's for John Humfries. And again his hand gun felt comfortable in the heel of his palm and he could not account for the feeling. A hunch, he supposed. Sometimes you get them when you're galloping past a redoubt that has been reported unmanned and then suddenly you swing your flank left front into line and plunge at it and discover a platoon of snarling gray figures about to rip your flank apart. Sometimes you get it when you're screening infantry and your common sense tells you to stay off the skyline, but you ride over it anyway and come into view of a mile-long baggage train lumbering across an open field, plump and soft for the killing. And other times you get that hunch at the edge of a town you are about to enter, and you swing aside and leave it behind; and months later you hear that so-and-so was waiting for you in an alley.

Humfries holstered his hand gun. He pried open a can of issue beef and picked at it with his knife. He watched the hurtling stream spew past between muddy banks; and then twilight deepened to darkness, and night was a damp and restless vastness all around him. The thunder was muttering weakly in the distance now, though it was still raining.

He finished eating and flattened the can and slung it into the stream. He smoked a while after that, keeping the cigarette in the cup of his palms, and then he tried to get some sleep. It wouldn't come, at first; it taunted him like some gray-faced beast circling for the kill. And through the bitterness that was in him he heard once

more the words, "Sleep, handmaiden to Death."

Where had he heard that? Ah yes, in the hospital north of Rafter's Run. A field surgeon with a rubber apron and perfumed side-whiskers had said that. He had been honing a scapel on a boot, and he had been smiling.

But Death's handmaiden didn't come to John Humfries for a long time that night. Odd phrases scampered through his tired head, and it was a task to chase them away. *Luh-tenant Daw! We kin saber 'em where they fall! Corman Craik, handmaiden to Death . . . Hero for hire . . . Me, John Humfries, a hero for hire. But who wants a hero? I'll tell you, John: the pigeons. Now go to sleep . . .*

And after a while, sleep came.

He threw himself off the groundsheet and cocked his good knee up and set his shooting arm along the top of his thigh, gun steady. He stayed like that a moment, switching his eyes back and forth across the prairie to southward. The pale yellow light of coming sunrise rinsed the breadth of the land and showed objects clearly; the rain had stopped, and there was no sound save the sigh of the stream and the impatient hoof chucks of a horse hobbled too long.

But nothing moved down there, no animal scuttered through grass in search of food, no bird clapped its wings in triumph at airborne freedom. Humfries holstered, unhobbled his horse and fed it, then fed himself. He packed, saddled, and threw the pack behind the saddle. He sniffed the clean air of storm-scrubbed skies and yawned mightily and rubbed his stomach. Today sometime he should arrive at Craik's.

He mounted and tapped rowels and lifted his legs high as the horse breasted into the stream and made white water. Then they were on the north bank and leaving the cottonwoods behind, and presently the sun came up and the chill of

night began to melt to the warmth of morning, and John Humfries felt pretty good. He spun a smoke together and hummed idly as he rode, and toward mid-morning he pushed into an alder-bearded vale that showed promise of a stream. He could water his horse and himself and cinch up and have a look around. Maybe there'd be a fence marker someplace, the kind they used since the war on account of the shortage of good wire: CRAIK'S LINE, E 40 M, W 28 M.

There was a spinning creek that flashed through the alders and Humfries let his horse go at it. He climbed up one shoulder of the vale and lay flat, hat off and hands leveled to temples. And his diaphragm sank away from his lungs and his mouth dried out and his spine tingled as if a feather tip had been traced along its length.

The man Daw was coming slowly up to the vale, shoulders low, arms idle, boots loose. His deep eyes and high nose and lean bronze features were black and white blobs under the shadow of his hatbrim. He was forking a double-rigged saddle and that told Humfries that the man came from Texas, where men were partial to the twin-cinch, the grass rope and the oxbow stirrup.

A Texas outfit, then. Humfries had been up against a Texas outfit at Rafter's Run.

He hadn't known it at the time—it was a meeting engagement and a meeting engagement is the most delicate thing in the world for a field commander to control. Humfries had been defending the ammunition train that was plodding along with wheels dripping dust and chains growling and balk-ends cracking and hames taut.

And the gray-clad men had spotted it—they must have played a hunch—and Daw made a pass for it and that's when they collided. There was a red moment of steel on muscle and flesh on bone and sabers

cutting at gun barrels—then the train blew up.

A Texas outfit. No wonder they'd holstered so damn much. John Humfries slid down off the shoulder and through the alders and caught up his horse and dragged the animal back up the shoulder and into the low timber of the high ground.

The man Daw rode cautiously into the vale and walked his roan to the stream and, after a look all around, let the horse water.

He stayed mounted, and he toyed idly with the butt-ring of an Adams pistol the while. He was fidgety. He kept plucking at the washed-out slate hue of what had been his uniform. And he kept looking all around.

It came to John Humfries that what was saving him now was the fact that he had not crossed the creek. Had he done that, his hoofmarks would have been fresh in the loam that is always to northward of water.

Daw slapped rein, had a last look around, and urged the roan through the creek. He rode slowly over the loam, and picked up the pace a bit beyond it. When he left the vale, he was trotting.

Once more he looked back. And then he trotted from sight.

Elation flooded through Humfries and made him feel more secure than he had in some time. It was true that Daw, being ahead now, could ambush; but it was equally true that he still believed he was behind, and probably would be more wary of running into an ambush than of making one.

Humfries gave him one hour, timing it by pulse-beat. At the end of one hour and two cigarettes, he swung up and short-reined his horse out of the alders and into the vale again. He took his time, the noon-ing sun was pleasant, and he had nothing to do but get to Craik's. That's why he was taking his time.

CHAPTER TWO

Gunhand for Hire

HE PICKED up Daw when the sun was hard down over his left arm, and he dropped back. Then he spurred ahead, and Daw was gone from the flatland where he'd been. So Humfries crossed it at a trot, and when the amber shadows of sunset were creeping across his path, he raised Craik's. It was a dog-trot place built from whipsawed planking and set back in some trees. A stable and a barn were behind it, and at either end of the barn were wired box corrals. That surprised Humfries, as he had supposed there wasn't much wire out here, and thought that what was here would have been used for fencing and not for corrals.

A black-haired breed in moccasins and a rancid buckskin shirt met him at the gate and waved him down. The breed had an old Hawken .53 on his arm, a buffalo plugger, and he held it on Humfries until a small man with a swing-tail black coat and cloth-limp Wellington boots ambled out from the house. Corman Craik said something to the breed, and the man walked away a few paces.

"Passin' through?" Craik's voice was brittle, like the slow crackling of green-sticks, and he spoke through his teeth, not using his lips much.

"Thought I'd like to stay a while." Humfries noted Craik's restless eyes and flat nostrils and rickety teeth. The man wore a soft-haired black moustache, and Humfries never had liked hair on a man's face. That field surgeon with the perfume whiskers, he supposed.

"Sign on, you mean?" Corman Craik adjusted his low-brimmed hat. "Army of the Potomac, I s'pose?"

"Army of the James."

Craik nodded. "Doesn't make a piece of difference to me. Hurt?"

"Healing."

Craik nodded again, sucked spit, and spat. "Most of 'em are, out here." Then he stabbed his eyes into Humfries. "Where'd you hear of this camp?"

Humfries told him, "In hospital." And Humfries spat. "When I was healing." He rested the inside of his right forearm against the butt of the hand gun, and it felt good.

"What do you call yourself?"

"My name is Humfries." He swung down and stood a head above the other. "And yours is Craik. Do I ride here, or not?"

Craik seemed surprised. "Certainly." His sudden wink was obscene. "Nothin' too good for our boys who fought the good fight." He opened the gate. "Only one thing . . . Humfries."

"Which is?" Already Humfries was searching for Daw, but he saw no one.

"If you don't ask questions, you don't get answers. And I hate answers. Answers commit a man. Maybe over at the Queen, you'd have to give a lot of answers."

Humfries was still searching for Daw, but the only other man he saw besides the breed was a stove-bellied Mexican who appeared behind the house and carried water to the barn. "Maybe over at the Queen, they wouldn't ask questions either. Queen's near here, isn't it?"

Corman Craik said, "Our fences parallel each other west. Bunkhouse by the boxes. Grub in the dog-trot. We check fence tomorrow."

"Who's the breed?"

"That's Joe. Yonder Mexkin's name is Perico." Craik narrowed his eyes beyond Humfries and sucked in a short breath and moved away from the gate as Humfries rode in. Then John Humfries turned and saw the rider coming in, and his diaphragm did queer things again. The rider was Daw. So he'd ridden right past Daw sometime that afternoon, and Daw hadn't thrown down.

Craik stuck two yellow thumbs into his lower weskit pockets and waited for Daw to say something. Daw regarded John Humfries with some curiosity but no insolence, and then he rested his eyes on Corman Craik. "I was informed, suh, that a man might find work here."

Craik assured him that he was right. "Your name'd be Smith, or Jones, or Brown, I s'pose?"

Daw kicked his right boot from its stirrup and swung down.

"My name, mistuh—Craik, is it?—is Montgomery Daw, late of Hood's Texas Brigade and damned proud of it. I came here because they's little ranchin' in the late Confederate States of America this year, an' northern brands like the Queen are shy of signin' on those who rode with Lee."

And again those deep eye sockets swung to Humfries.

John Singleton Humfries left the gate and turned in his horse to Perico and sought the bunkhouse. There were four double-tiered log bunks and only three of the lowers had blankets. There was no personal clothing at all. The stove was cold.

Humfries tossed his gear onto one of the blankets and found a basin and went to the pump and washed down. He went back to the bunkhouse and shook down his gear and stowed the groundsheet under the bunk and went to work on the stove, and that's when Montgomery Daw came in.

Daw was taller than Humfries. He was longer of leg and leaner of hip, but his shoulders weren't so heavy nor his arms so long. Daw said softly, "See you were in the cavalry."

"How'd you know that?" The stove caught, and Humfries opened the flue and half-set the door.

"Yonder revolver. The outsized trigger guard—so a man with horse gloves can pull the trigger without removin' the gloves."

John Humfries asked, "Why didn't you bag me? You've been behind me for a month."

Daw's smile was sad. "Me, I'm disenfranchised from takin' a commission again. Picked the right side but the wrong winner. Bag you?" He dropped his gear on the opposite lower.

"You've been wantin' to—" Humfries almost whispered the rest— "since Rafter's Run."

Daw wrenched himself around from the bunk. The anger was piling into his eyes, was bringing his teeth down tight. And blood washed into his cheeks and made his temples throb. "That place? You were at that place?"

Puzzlement took hold of Humfries; it relaxed his tensed muscles. "I thought you knew."

Daw took in the weather-beaten blues and the smoke-stained hat. "You wouldn't have been with Hood, o' course."

Humfries said, "With Sheridan."

"I see." Memory of it lay between them now and memory of it was not nice. It was the hateful crash of horse on horse and man against man, and it was the thunder-clap of a train of wagons disintegrating in hurtling ruination that deafened men and blew them like dolls into the scrub and left them there to moan—those that still lived. "The wagons, huh?"

"That's right. I saw you, Daw."

"I didn't see you."

Humfries stepped closer. "Is that why you didn't ambush?"

"On the ride out here?" Daw's chin came up an inch. "Hell, no. It's just that I don't cotton to strangers on the trail."

Relief completely relaxed Humfries' muscles, and he found it in him to thrust out a hand and mumble his name.

Daw took it, and gave his. "But don't call me 'Monty'." He pulled free his hand, and flipped it at the empty bunks. "Guess we got this place alone. The Mex an' the breed got blankets in the barn."

"Let's go eat." Humfries waited, not moving, and Daw went out first. He went out with his elbow near the high butt of the Adams pistol, and when Humfries followed, he kept his hand near his holster.

ALL through supper, which was taken in silence except for the smacking of Cormon Craik's gums, the two who had been at Rafter's Run eyed each other surreptitiously through the unsteady lamp shadows.

Craik shucked coffee back and forth through his teeth and reached for a cheroot. "Seems you boys know each other," he ventured.

"We've never been introduced." Humfries went for a smoke and lighted it without offering makings.

Daw said, "We jus' met."

Craik was beaming. "You'll see a lot of each other, ridin' fence alone."

"You got no other hands?" Daw was frowning.

"Two's enough for what I got in mind. Two hands, a cook like Perico, a guard like Joe . . . and myself."

Humfries spouted smoke without taking the cigarette from his lips. "What have you got in mind, Mr. Craik?"

"Well, there's a drive comin' up from Red River way to Omaha. Thought I'd throw into it." He winked first at Humfries, then at Daw. "Now that I got hands who're grateful for the work."

Perico padded in from the cook shack and started to clean up, and Cormon Craik reminded his riders, "We take out at sunrise. To check fence." He winked again, quickly, and left.

The four of them rode single file—Craik leading, Humfries second, Daw third, and the breed, Joe, closing the rear. They trailed west away from Craik's and pushed into the passes that would take them into the fringes of Queen country.

Only once did Humfries speak. "How big's your range, Mr. Craik?" he asked.

And only once did Craik speak. "Big enough," he said.

John Humfries' leg began to hurt him toward noon. He had to hitch onto his right hip to allow the left leg to swing away from leather for a while, and when he did that he heard Daw's rowel-sharp undertone: "Two're watchin' you."

They trailed onto higher ground and poked south of west for a mile, and Humfries saw the distant dark blobs of grazing cattle. He was amused, for a moment, at Daw's warning. He counted the dark blobs—there were less than thirty—and then he twisted around and studied that lean bronze face with the arched nose. "What for, Reb?"

The mouth jerked once—side to side. Then came level. "In case you conclude to draw the gun that's hangin' out from yore hip. I don't ask for reasons—once it comes all the way out."

Humfries faced forward so Daw wouldn't see his smile. "Fine by me, Monty." He straightened, and bore the full ache of the shrapnel wounds. He could bear them now, he had before.

"An' my name's not Monty, I'll thank you to remember, suh."

Cormarr Craik led them to within half a mile of the cattle before he stopped. "That's my herd, yonner. And there's my fence. If you look sharp, you can see the Queen fence beyond it. Where the rope patchin' is." And he snickered to himself. Joe, the breed, came around from the rear and sat his pony up-slope of them, the Hawken held high.

Humfries coughed loudly. "That all you got to throw into the Omaha drive, Mr. Craik?"

Craik's tone was strange. "Maybe I'll have more. Might buy some Queen stock." He started to wink, and didn't. "Queen cattle won't be ready for the yards till next season . . . the Queen men say." Then he winked. "I say different."

A small breeze came down off the top

ranges, and the horses swung into it, warm from the ride up-country. It brought the scent of alders and cedar, and it carried the rancid, metallic odor of the breed.

Craik went on, "There's a lot of stock yonner on the Queen range. I guess they're keepin' it away from the boundaries, here, 'cause the drive passes this way. Stock'd get excited if they saw it."

"When's the drive come through?"

"Oh-h, two-three days now." Craik eyed Joe and Joe nodded. "I'm sure I can depend on you boys to help me throw in." He cleared his throat, not winking, not moving a muscle. "There's a bonus in it—if you throw in proper."

Quietly, John Humfries asked, "Suppose it doesn't come off?"

The breed shifted weight on his mat saddle, and swung the Hawken buffalo gun to a lower position. It was pointing directly at Humfries. And the breeze blew itself out and the sun was hot on them and the scent of alders and cedar gave way to the nitrous off-breathings of moist horsehides and damp leather and warm gunmetal.

Craik shot spit. "So I'll leave you two to ride my fence. For tonight and tomorrow, to get used to it. Then Joe here and me'll come back . . . to help you throw in proper."

Humfries and Daw watched Craik and the breed ride easily off the topland and down into the lower passes. They watched for some time, before Montgomery Daw spoke.

"What's the play, Humfries?"

John Humfries looked Daw over carefully, taking his time. "I thought you could tell me. Something doesn't smell good—and I don't mean that roan." There was no humor in Humfries now, only sullen suspicion and deep anger at himself. He felt like a scarred chess piece that had been moved in the wrong direction, without planning or point.

Daw studied his palms and licked his

lower lip and, using his knees, brought the roan around closer to Humfries. "You'd be an old friend of Craik's, perhaps?" He was utterly polite, dangerously so. "I never saw you at the Run . . . or any other place." He turned his palms over. "'Cept on the ride out here."

"That's about what I meant. Disfranchised cavalry officers do strange things—after their services are terminated."

A thin smile carved narrow lines around Daw's mouth and his eyes iced over. His palms lay lightly on his thighs.

Far to westward a faint thrumming vibrated across the prairie silences, from the direction of the Queen range.

Humfries husked, "Like the comin' of a storm, isn't it?"

"Somewhat. Shall we have a look that way?"

Humfries took rein. "After you, Daw."

"No—you first, this time." The butting of the Adams clinked.

They filed toward Craik's fence and walked along it until they found a sway-looped break. The thrumming was louder, but not so insistent, as if it had been slowed down. "Sounds like a posse, don't it, Daw?"

"Would that scare you, Humfries?"

HUMFRIES led the way through the sagging loops and onto the sun-fried grasses of the middle ground. He wondered why the Queen fence was patched in places with rope.

"No, Daw. I don't scare easy." Humfries threw off and strode to the nearest strand of rope patching and tugged at it. "Rich brand like the Queen shouldn't have to use this."

Daw swung down and tried the rope. The hooves from the Queen side were silent now. "After a war, you have to use what you've got. Busted wire, broken men . . ." He let it fade there.

Anger crawled up through John Hum-

fries and made him do things of which he had no forewarning. It made him rest his weight on his good leg and cock back a fist and snag it out in a flash-hook that caught Daw under the jaws and rocked him off balance and spent him sprawling into the fence and tripping over a bottom strand and thumping onto his shoulderblades on Queen property.

He threw himself forward and rolled to his knees and came out through the fencing in a catapult leap that was stopped by two of Humfries' fists. Daw slashed them off and drove in hard with a belly-shaking right that snapped John Humfries forward with an out-gasp of air that left his mouth open. Daw closed in with a undercut and Humfries rose on his toes and sagged sideways and went down on his left knee and crabbed for balance.

Daw pranced backward lightly. "Git up, Yank. You got more comin'," he gritted.

Humfries got up. He got up and crouched forward and started to swing with a left and retracted it and lashed out with a right that connected with Daw's unguarded side teeth and sent him spinning against the Queen fence again.

The wire sprang back in counter-action to his weight and he was shoved free of it and Humfries hammered four swift knuckles into that bronze face and knocked Montgomery Daw through the rotten rope strands and onto Queen land again. And this time Humfries hurdled the bottom strands and clutched Daw by the neckerchief and hauled him erect and slapped him across the jaws and cocked a right for a finishing punch, when Daw ducked expertly under it and crashed a fist into Humfries' mouth and reeled him against a post and let him drop to the ground, jaws swinging loosely.

A shot rapped smartly and the bullet ripped dust between them. And men on foot were cat-stepping down on them from a grassy rise and a stout-cheeked man in a checkered shirt was holstering his hand

gun and motioning to the others. "Surround 'em. Don't let 'em out."

Humfries came to his feet and got next to Daw. "What the hell's this—the infantry on parade?"

Checkered Shirt wiped the underside of his face with a grimy palm. "I'm Kennett. Kennett's bench foreman for the Queen. And Kennett don't like little boys stealin' his wire an' then bustin' his rope to steal more. Kennett spansks youngsters like that—'specially Craik's youngsters . . . Come on—let's drub 'em an' throw 'em back where they come from!"

John Humfries half-crouched. "Reb—take the right flank, I'll take the left."

"I hear you, Sheridan."

There were three Queen riders on each side of Kennett and they lunged all at once. John Singleton Humfries shoved himself off his right leg and sailed crossbody into the bench foreman's pumping knees and shoulder-checked the man onto his chest and sprang up and belted a hatless man in the throat and caught him by the armpits and flung him around and drove a boot into the small of his back and hurled him into the other two.

Kennett was up and reaching and Humfries let him come, braced himself, caught the punch and vised Kennett's forearm and half-twisted and drew Kennett into the air and over his back and dumped him into the dust. The other three were up and coming in, and for one eyeflick John Humfries saw Daw using the flopping form of a Queen rider as a windmill that was scything down two others.

Then the hatless man and two more were leaping Kennett's grunting, blinking person, and Humfries raised a fast boot and felt the sharp shock of breastbone on leather. He hooked his leg down as suddenly airless muscles fell away from it and tripped his spur into an instep and side-swatted a snarling face and sent the man stumbling over the one he'd stopped

with his foot. The third man swung and hit and Humfries staggered backward and tripped over the rising Kennett and they both went down. The third man swan-dove over Kennett and Humfries arched up both knees and the flying form landed on his heels and squealed once and bounced off. Then Humfries jerked himself up and bent to Kennett and yanked the foreman's hat over his nose and grabbed Montgomery Daw by the elbow. Daw pitched his windmill free and hopped through the fence after Humfries and paced him back to the sagging loops of Craik's fence and through them to the two waiting horses.

They got their legs up and found stirrups and collected rein. As they spurred past the broken loops they waved to the seven Queen riders who were coming together by the rope strands. John Humfries pulled around and saw quick admiration in Kennett's battered face. Kennett was turning his hatbrim through his hands, and when Humfries looked at him, he waved it. Humfries and Daw threw him a salute and rode on down the fence line, mute acknowledgment of a truce keeping their faces averted from each other and mutual reluctance to speak keeping them quiet.

But each, as he rode, kept a hand near his gun. Night was thickening in the east and soon it would be dark. Strange things happen in the dark on lonely fence lines, when men remain in sight of one another because of mistrust, not confidence.

CHAPTER THREE

Rustler, Make Your Play

CRAIK and the breed came out the next day from the place, sitting a rickety flatbed rig with their horses strung to the tail gate. Craik inspected the repairs to the break where

the loop had been, and then he looked long at the rope patching on the Queen fence. He wanted to know if any Queen stock had been seen. He wanted to know if any Queen riders had shown up. He seemed nervous.

"We had a little scrap yestiddy," Daw told him. "About stealin' their wire."

The breed's eyes widened, then half-closed. He moved the Hawken to a more comfortable position on his lap.

Craik broke out rations. "That all?" "Isn't it enough?"

Craik licked the end of a cheroot, sniffed it, stuck it in his teeth, and lighted it. "Kennett's not so tough. He tries any trouble, I'll be ready." He winked at the breed. "Right, Joe?"

Joe didn't say anything.

Humfries was eating off his knife. He wiped it on his palm and swigged some coffee and put the knife away. "What's on the rig, Mr. Craik?"

"Irons. Irons and—" he stared west at a flinting pall of dust rising from the Queen range—"kerosene for camp lamps and—" he watched the distant dust edging north—"branding fires." He pointed with his cheroot. "Herd, Joe. Movin' up to snatch feed in the timber."

The breed took great interest in that.

John Humfries peered under the hood of the rig and saw the irons and the jars of kerosene and the tar buckets. He asked, "We brand your stock now?" It didn't seem credible, with the drive due from Red River. It didn't seem credible if Craik was really going to throw in.

Corman Craik studied the gummy end of his cherott. "I may hair brand, later." He inhaled, held it, and exhaled. "And I may not."

Two men were riding slowly north up the east trail that flanked both the Queen and Craik ranges. One peeled off and came up to the rig and nodded all around.

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He was white with alkali from forehead to the undersides of his boots. Some of the alkali sifted off his vest when he flipped it back to show the metal star on his shirt.

"I'm Myers, deputy from Dodge. You Craik?"

Craik stood closer to the rig, where the breed held the Hawken. "I'm Craik."

"Well—" Myers spoke as if the word had salted his mouth with distaste, as if the name Craik conjured up unpleasant memories— "this'll let you know a drive's comin' along soon, so hold in your stock. I'd 'ppreciate your passin' the word to Kennett."

Craik pursed his lips. "I may throw in, on the drag."

"That's not my business." Myers nodded curtly and circled away from the rig and cantered down to the trail and fell in beside the other rider.

Corman Craik was smiling.

John Singleton Humfries and Montgomery Daw shared the makings, in that moment, though neither had requested a smoke. They lighted up and there was that between them that comes to men who sense a threat greater than any individual threat they could pose to themselves. It comes as a hunch, sometimes, and it is a valuable warning instinct.

Craik stepped on his cheroot and was motioning Humfries to him when they all saw the man riding at them from the Queen topland where the herd had gone for grazing. The man was Kennett, and he left his horse at the Queen fence and came through on foot.

"Mornin'," Corman Craik greeted. "This saves me sending a man to warn you."

"Warn me of what?"

"Of the drive."

"I know all about the drive, Craik. Which is why I'm here."

"Is it?" Craik remained near the rig, close to the Hawken's black bore.

"It is." Kennett glanced quickly at

Humfries and Daw. Then he faced Craik. "I want to keep the honest honest, that's all. Somebody—" he raised his eyes to the breed— "has sliced wire and left rope. I wouldn't want it to happen again. . . . How're your fine new box corrals, Mister Craik?"

"They're fine, thank you."

Nobody spoke for long minutes. There was only the whimper of harness, the clink of a spur and the following tinkle of a rowel . . . and then they heard the drive coming.

A dog yipped first. It was a white mongrel, and it bobbed past with tongue flopping and tail revolving. The noise of the drive drowned it out and the yipping was lost in the rising rumble of thudding hooves and the cracking of horns and creak of ankle joints. The lead men jogged past and lifted an arm to those who watched, and the watchers waved back. The broad front of the drive brought its own dust and sent it spinning heavenward where erratic winds caught it and drew it away east. And then the swing men went by and the drive thinned, toward the middle. The front was north of them now, and the drifting steers reminded Humfries of brown leaves blown idly across a huge lawn.

"It'll take the rest the afternoon for that to get past," Daw said reverently. "A thing of beauty, a trail drive."

Kennett started to say something, didn't, and turned and stooped through the wire and took his horse. He sat his saddle a moment, watching the drive. And then he rode away.

Craik put his two riders on his own herd and had it urged toward the rig. The breed got the etnas smoking and put the irons in and set out the tar, and meanwhile they watched the drive bumble past. Craik was timing his branding to the appearance of the drag, where he said he might throw in. He went to the rig twice and found a flask and sucked at it. He

smoked several short, dark cheroots.

Then he said, "That drive'll bed for the night somewheres on the north fork of the Paradise. What I think we'll do is throw in toward dawn, when they're startin' out again." He flicked his eyes to the breed, flicked them to Humfries. Rested then on Daw. "Then we'll all be rich."

Daw pushed his tongue into his cheek. "On thirty a month and chuck?"

"No—on the bonus you boys'll get for a night's work." He winked at each in turn, and smiled. "S'pose some rope got cut, and some grazin' yearlings got drawn through it and hair-branded with my irons and thrown into that drive? Why, you boys could spend a month in Omaha with a bonus!"

Humfries' instincts gathered at the base of his spine and scampered up it—like a feather tip. And his mouth dried out and he had to make spit. "Suppose the rope didn't get cut, and the herd didn't get run through it?"

Craik was arrogant. "Who else'll sign on a gimp-leg and an ex-Reb? Or even give 'em a bonus for routine jobbing?"

Montgomery Daw's voice was satin-soft. "Man's right, Humfries. Where else can we get work? I recommend, suh, that we—take that bonus."

THE relationship of man to man is exactly the same as that of poker hand to pot. It is an invisible, intangible network of value risked for value received, of watchfulness rewarded and bluff distended. It is also a matter of timing.

Humfries swallowed. "You're on, then."

Craik washed his hands in the air. "I knew we'd have no trouble . . . anybody want a drink to set the sun?" He thought it fine indeed that his two new riders were veterans of four years of shooting, and would be able to hit moving targets in

the night. He thought it too bad, in a way, that soon they must become two old riders and of no use to anyone again, ever. He drank.

The drag of the drive and the chuck and hooligan wagons and the *remuda* were gone north by twilight, and after darkness fell, when the moon was a slim silver sickle low over the east, Craik led them out. The breed kept his pony between Craik and the riders, Hawken braced on hip. Craik reminded them, "Once through the fence, we brand where the rig stands, then get 'em all onto the trail."

The rope was no trouble at all, and the four of them fanned out and headed for the top ranges, where the grazing was so good.

"Shoot on sight," Craik repeated. He was still nervous.

Presently they got off and led their horses, Craik far ahead, the breed in the rear. Humfries saw his chance, then. He snaked out a hand to Daw and murmured, "Remember Rafter's Run? By Mighty, you should."

Daw took his hand, tentatively. "Want to fight it over again?"

"In a sense. Follow my lead." He edged closer and lowered his voice.

"Which is?"

Craik had halted, suspicious of the whisperings.

Humfries barely exhaled the words. "We'll blow up the train . . . but if we don't get through alive, this—" their palms gripped hard— "doesn't go."

Corman Craik looked them over in the star darkness. "There are two ways to move someone else's herd—by rush, and by easement. We'll ease. Understand?"

"Suppose Kennett gets in the way?"

"He won't. He'll be up on the Paradise tryin' to swap his dryhorns for some trail-broke stock. But if anyone does get in the way. . . ." Craik shrugged it off. "Come on."

Humfries and Daw followed, side by side, and Humfries was beginning to enjoy this poker hand. He had tested the pot with an ante; now he had to play the hand against time. They mounted and circled the grazers and started easing. They eased the bewildered herd off the top-land and down toward the frayed rope fencing. Humfries clucked his tongue to Daw and rode across to Corman Craik and leaned at him. "I think someone's at the rig. I'll go down."

Craik came erect. "I'll send Joe."

But John Humfries already was jouncing down to the rope strands and through them and into Craik's cut wire that had been repaired that morning. He threw off at the rig and found the jars of kerosene and smashed them and threw a match into the flatbed and sprang to his saddle and galloped hard.

The night whitened with a storm of exploding flame that leapt starward and lashed into the faces of the easing herd and kicked its delicate sanity lopsided.

Daw's horse came apart and plunged across the flank of the terror-torn steers and crop-hopped right into them. Humfries stabbed spurs and put himself after Daw and got Daw's bridle even as the ominous blast of the Hawken fanned his neck and he felt one of the pellets drive into his arm. He see-sawed Daws' bridle and dragged him free of the lancing horns and let him go. Craik was screaming and the Hawken smashed again and the herd smothered the sound with hoof thunder and the rubbly bellowing of fear. It was fighting its way out of the white pyre's dancing reflection, and in that blinding light Humfries saw the lead steers smother Craik's running horse and crush it and trample over it and leave nothing behind.

The Adams barked sharply and the Hawken's pellets whistled high overhead as the breed shuddered and slid from his mat saddle and jerked, suddenly, as his pony whirled away from the light, reins

free. The pony dragged the breed's stirrup-caught body after the herd, and Daw blew smoke from the Adams' lip and said, "Thanks, Humfries, for gettin' me clear."

"Thanks, Daw, for not sabering me."

Yelling ripped from the night beyond the burning rig and riders swept over the rise and Kennett was hoarse from shouting and when he saw Humfries he came right at him. "Don't move! We're all around you!" he yelled.

The deputy from Dodge was there, searching for Craik, and Daw told him to relax. "He's chopped meat now—an' so's that breed, 'less I miss my guess."

Daw offered makings to Humfries, and Humfries took them. They told Kennett all about it, and Kennett took his hands off his guns.

The deputy wiped alkali from his face and flung spit. "You two wouldn't have reached the Paradise alive. That's where the breed was supposed to come in."

"And Craik could blame us for it?"

The deputy didn't answer. He didn't have to.

Then Kennett was blurting, "If you two heroes want to quit scrappin' all the time, why, I guess I could take you on."

Humfries rubbed his left leg. "I got an off-hock here, Kennett, you should know about."

"I saw it workin' yesterday."

And Daw had to tell him, "I was a Texas Reb, and I still am, and I'm proud of it."

Kennett wagged his hands quickly. "Don't let's start anything more. Now buckle down them holsters, an' when this rig burns itself out, we'll go onto the Queen an' promote some chuck."

After a while the two newly-hired men rode out of the dying firelight and onto the Queen range, side by side.

The smell of the new day was on the dawn breeze, and it was clean and crisp and it came all the way out of the west.

FAST TRIGGER MAN

By NORMAN A. FOX



Teague covered him from the doorway of the stable. . . .

*"You've got a gun and a rep, Marshal—there's just one thing needed to make you the kind of lawman I like, and here it is—
a bullet!"*

NOW THAT the first blizzard had blown itself out, Corb Coultis could look upon the endless white of the range around him, seeing the snow-locked land beneath a lead-gray sky, with the sun a poached egg dimly showing. Corb wasn't so fond of ranching just then, thinking of Hub Phelan's general store in Genesee, twenty miles across the empti-

ness, thinking of the boys spitting at the stove and telling fat lies, or Doc Boucher maybe dropping in at the marshal's office, friendly-mean, to have his pass at the checkerboard. Come to study on it, ranching in wintertime Montana was being in jail the same as Teague was in jail, only Teague got a little company when they came around with the grub.

On the third morning of Corb's patience, a moving blob showed against the snow, and that was Doc Boucher's buggy with the wheels off and bobs put on in place. Corb moved the coffeepot to the front of the stove and had it making happy sounds when Boucher crammed the doorway, looking like a bear stirred out of his sleep.

Corb made a pass to go put up the horses, but Boucher said, "I got to get on to Hashknife. Nobody gives a doctor a minute's rest."

Corb said, "I got the checkerboard set up just the way it was in town."

Boucher looked at the checkerboard on the table, then let his little eyes rove the one room ranch house. He scowled at Corb. "Look at you," he said. "Six foot two of lodgepole pine and whang leather. A face like a grieving horse. And you ain't hit forty yet. Give this spread back to Pete Shipley and start doing a man's work again."

"The last I saw of Pete," said Corb, "he was hightailing it over a hill, my money in his hand and his shirt tail out and flapping. He's warming his toes in Miles City right now."

"Then let this place cave in by itself and get back to Genesee."

"My work in town is done."

Boucher shrugged out of his buffalo coat and let it fall to the floor. He lumbered to the stove and helped himself to coffee. "It's come undone at the seams. The first night of the big blow, Teague peeled the jail off."

Something tied up inside Corb like he'd been kicked in the belly. "Anybody hurt?"

"He got Finney's gun away from him and laid it between Finney's horns. I put in six stitches. Finney's too old to be town marshal."

Corb made fists out of his hands and looked at the fists, then spread his fingers. "Won't be nothing like that happen again in Genesee for the next ten years."

Boucher fetched the coffee to the table and sat down on the most passable chair. He had eyebrows like jutting ledges and a face that was solid and weathered. "Corb," he said, "you're running away."

Corb stiffened up. "Nobody complained when I quit."

"No, sir," Boucher agreed. "They'd have give you a torchlight parade, if you'd let 'em. You quit in a blaze of glory. Curly McCandless stiff out in the street and Teague in the lockup. That last show was like the old days. I remember when Genesee was a barrel of whiskey and a tent at the crossroads and the cattle poured up out of Texas. You watched that town grow, too, Corb. She was hell-roaring, but you kept the lid latched down. These last few years you got paid to stand around and make a pretty shadow. The rep you built had strangers walking soft."

Corb nodded. "That's history, Doc."

Boucher snorted. "McCandless and Teague sure looked like history repeating itself. It softened my arteries to smell powdersmoke in town again."

"They were out of Miles," Corb said. "I found dodgers on them in the office after they rode in. Murder, it said. By the time I got around to tapping 'em on the shoulder, they were liquored and prowling. I wrapped 'em up neat as I knew how." He sighed. "Doc, you know I'd been thinking about this place ever since Pete Shipley put it for sale last summer."

Boucher got his coffee saucered and blowed. "Some are talking about passing the hat and having you a monument put up."

"Then they'd better hang a badge and a gun on it."

Boucher's little eyes squinted down. "So that's it, Corb. You got afraid."

Corb sat down, folding his long body to fit a chair. He stared at his hands. He guessed maybe others hadn't been fooled any more than Doc had been fooled.

Still, you didn't find folks as wise as Doc very often. Confound a man who peeled the hide off you and looked to see where your real brand lay!

"In the old days," Corb said, "a man walked up and down with his badge and his gun. If a trail herd came to town, a few Texans needed cooling, and maybe one had to see how high I stacked. I never drew on a man if there was a second choice. Then came the easy years. Doggone, I thought the calendar was crazy when them two drifters rode in. McCandless was slow at the showdown, Doc, molasses slow; he should have had Teague posted before he made his play. I injuned around behind Teague after McCandless went down. He was some surprised, Teague was."

Boucher put his hands flat on the table. "I'm a simple man, Corb. Just tell me real slow why that should have had you turning in your badge."

"McCandless was wearing a blue neckerchief, Doc. With little white dots." Corb's face screwed up. "He lay there dead, facedown in the dirt, and the wind stirred his neckerchief a little."

"Hell's bells, Corb! What did that have to do with it?"

"I thought you already savvied, Doc. I was wearing one too. Maybe a dozen men had 'em. They were selling 'em in Miles last time I was there."

Boucher's face came apart with astonishment. "So you got thinking it might have been you?"

Corb nodded. "A rep isn't bulletproof. I got to thinking. What was this Corb Coultis that all the shouting was about? A man, Doc, or a badge and a gun and a lot of talk that had built across the years? Then I remembered every ruckus and how I'd always been left standing. I wondered how long a man could crowd that kind of luck. When I saw that blue neckerchief on McCandless, I savvied how slim the margin was."

Boucher said, "Oh, hell!" sounding kind of strangled. He gulped his coffee, picked his buffalo coat from the floor and got into it. He said then, "I've slapped the backsides of the new ones and pulled the blankets over the faces of the old ones. I've only learned one thing from all of it; when a man gets afraid to die, then he's afraid to live."

Corb felt hot inside. "I did my share in my day."

Boucher walked over to the checkerboard and studied it. He moved one of the pieces, jumping two of Corb's men. This was their ritual, pretending that Doc never had time for a full game; and they'd already kept this game going endless weeks.

Doc said, "Your move, Corb." He strode to the door and got it open, letting in the winter.

Corb asked then, "What about Teague?"

"He helped himself to a horse. There'll be a posse out, now that the weather's lifted. But where's tracks after the big blow? He's one fugitive they'll never catch."

Corb said, "Come back again, Doc."

"Sure," Boucher said. "Next thing you'll be shying at shadows."

WHEN the door closed, Corb rubbed a hole in the window's frost and watched Boucher drive away, and then Corb found himself aimless and twice as alone. He washed up Doc's cup and saucer and then got to studying what to do next, and it came to him easy—when you'd turned rancher you put in your time at ranching. The few cows that had come with Pete Shipley's place had probably turned their rumps to the storm, drifting south. Corb went out to the barn and saddled up. He rode along slow, bucking the drifts and sometimes getting off to lead the horse when the going got tough.

All the while he was feeling peevish as a catamount with cockleburrs. He decided he was provoked at Doc. It had been bad enough for Corb, knowing that he'd run. Doc had had no business stripping him down and looking for scars that didn't show. If a man had his own kind of sickness and hankered to crawl in a hole and lick his wounds, that was his concern. Yet some good had come of that talk with Doc; Corb felt more like an honest citizen. He'd winced when they'd talked of a torchlight parade in Genesee and looked at him big-eyed like they were around a great man.

By grab, he had kept the peace for them a long, long time; a man had a right to put himself out to pasture when the saddle began to gall him.

Far to the south, almost to the wire, he found his herd looking like it could stand a lot more weather, and he choused the cows as far north as the haystacks Pete Shipley had put up. He let down the wire around one stack and forked out some hay and watched the cows work at it. A time or two, he'd wondered what cows thought about, and he found himself envying those placid critters. Come another fall and they'd be fattened up and he'd trail them to the railroad and put them aboard the cars. One day they'd find themselves in Omaha, facing a man with an axe. That's what you got for being a cow. Meanwhile, though, they'd chew their cuds and take what came in the way of weather, the good days and the bad. Not knowing about death, they weren't afraid.

That made Corb think of Doc again.

Heading homeward, Corb saw a black arch of clouds to the west, a promise that what the Indians called the black wind, the chinook wind, might come. It made Corb easier in his mind, and he got a notion to angle off into the breaks along the Little Milk, where the high lift of timbered hills shut off the horizon. Soon

he was beyond his own wire and into a broken wedge of land belonging to Hashknife. He was like a man hunting with no real game in mind, just lazing along and admiring of his shadow and waiting for whatever might stir out of the brush.

Presently he looked down from a wooded bluff on Hashknife's south line shack.

Smoke lifted from its chimney, he saw, and snow burdened the ridgepole. That little log house looked lost and forlorn. He edged his horse down the slope, and soon he could see tracks in the yard, crisscrossing from line shack to stable. The corral stood empty. Not putting his mind to it, Corb, coming closer, shook out of his mittens and got his sheepskin unbuttoned, so his gun would be free to his hand. Then he swung down the saddle and peered at the closed door and the frosted window. And Teague said from the doorway of the stable, "Just raise your hands."

Teague was standing there with Finney's gun in his fist.

Corb gave himself a cussing then, keeping it inside and silent, as he got his hands up.

Now he savvied what had drawn him to Hashknife's line shack; when a man had worn a badge a lot of years he did some kinds of thinking without putting words to it. Teague, busting out of Genesee's jail with a blizzard howling at his heels, would have headed for shelter. Teague, coming into this country by way of Miles City, might have passed this line shack on his ride and remembered it later.

There'd just been one piece to it that Corb hadn't thought about until too late. Old Ludlow of Hashknife had said something a month back about not using the line shack this winter. That was why Corb had freed his gun, seeing those tracks. But it had been his hand working, not his mind.

Behind the shack those high hills made

the bars of Teague's new prison, keeping him here till a chinook whisked the snow away. In the other direction lay Genesee.

Teague was whipsawed, but he didn't look it, coming forward with white teeth glimmering in a tangle of black beard, a hard shine to his eyes like an animal's peering from a thicket.

Teague said, "You!" like this was his birthday and somebody had remembered to send him a present. He reached and got Corb's gun and flung it far away, into a snowdrift. Corb had to stand there, but now he knew how the cows felt when they finally got to the man with the axe. He was thinking that he'd shucked his badge in Genesee, and now his gun had been shucked for him, and that left him naked in the winter.

Teague took a quick look up the slope to be sure no posse was tagging Corb. He got around behind Corb and dug at Corb's spine with the gun.

"Get that jughead out of sight," Teague said.

Corb led the horse to the stable. He recognized the cayuse Teague had there; it belonged to one of the flat country ranchers.

"Inside," Teague said, gesturing toward the shack.

The line shack was like Pete Shipley's ranchhouse, one room with a kitchen range and a bunk built into a corner and a slab table and some crippled chairs. Teague

backed Corb into the middle of it and stood fingering the gun, making up his mind.

Finally he said, "Me and Curly McCandleless had our ups and our downs, but we rode a lot of miles together."

Corb looked at him, remembering the reward dodger and that one word MURDER in big, black type; and looking at Teague, he saw all the men of Teague's breed, the blustery ones and the silent ones. Jawing wouldn't help. "Get it over with," Corb said, feeling tired.

Teague's face twitched with his thinking, and Corb waited this out. "A posse will come busting this way before the hills open," Teague judged. "Maybe you'll be worth something in a dicker, if they get me holed up here."

Corb sat down and let his arms fall. "Then you and me better get used to each other's company."

Teague thought that over, and his eyes began laughing. "You'll work your keep meantime, mister. We could use some kindling."

Corb said, "You're calling this dance."

TEAGUE marched him out again and around to the side of the stable where Hashknife's crew had dragged down a lot of lodgepole pine from the hills and left it lying. A rusty bucksaw was in the stable, and a nicked axe, and Corb got up quite a sweat, Teague sitting all the while on a stump,

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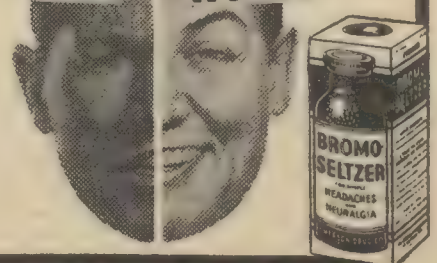
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the gun in his hand, cussing out Corb good. Corb hacked up enough wood to last a week and toted a good share of it into the line shack. By then it was getting dark.

"Stoke up that fire," Teague ordered. "Then rustle us some supper."

Corb took the lamp down from a shelf behind the stove and moved toward the table with it. Suddenly that lamp felt good and hefty in his hand; his back was to Teague for a moment, and he was of a notion to make a play. Damned if he liked this kind of frolicking; if a man had to die, there might as well be some dignity to it.

But Teague must have seen the stiffening of his back, for the fugitive said, "Just ease that lamp down real careful and move away from it."

Corb did as he was told, his anger a tightness in his throat.

Teague moved up and got the lamp lighted, using only one hand and keeping the gun steady. "Now rustle that grub," he said.

Hashknife had stocked the shack with bacon and flour and coffee, Corb discovered, when he got rummaging around a cupboard. That was when he found the strychnine. He got to thinking about the strychnine and scheming on it, not letting his face show to Teague as he worked up a mess of biscuits. He had trouble keeping his hands from trembling. He got bacon to curling in a pan and the coffee going. Teague gave him the feel of the gun in his back more than once.

"Hurry it up!" Teague ordered.

Teague was surely having a time for himself.

When the table was set, Corb forked the bacon onto the plates and set out the biscuits and would have got the coffee, only Teague said, "I'm the huckleberry for that job. You might get a notion to heave the pot." He poured the coffee himself. "Drink yours!" he ordered Corb,

leveling the gun and not giving Corb a chance to let Teague have a cupful in the face. Corb drank his coffee. Teague placed the gun by his plate and gulped down his own coffee and started in on the bacon and biscuits.

Corb said then, "Feel it?"

Teague scowled. "Feel what?"

"The coffee. I could have put strychnine in it."

"Strychnine!"

Corb's face was wooden. "There's some there on the shelf. Go look for yourself. You new to Montana? Every cowboy carries strychnine on his saddle to poison wolves. Every line shack is stocked with it."

Teague lumbered up from the table so suddenly he rattled the plates. He got to the cupboard and pawed into the sacks till he found the one with the white, crystalline powder. He turned, his eyes wild. "You drank it, too!"

Corb said, "I dealt with your kind for ten years straight, Teague. You'd keep me alive as long as I was useful, but you'd be remembering Curly McCandless. You'd kill me at the showdown, posse or not. I just cut myself out of a couple of days."

Teague came toward him and jammed the gun hard against Corb's belly. "There's got to be a medicine for this!"

Corb nodded.

"Then mix it up!"

Corb said, "A couple of days isn't worth that much to me."

Sweat stood out on Teague. "You'll do it, or I'll yank the trigger!"

"Put the gun on the table and back away, mister. That's my price."

Teague still held the gun, but he groped to his chair and sat down heavily. He stared at Corb, his eyes showing fear, his eyes not quite believing. The tip of his tongue was a red spot in his tangle of whiskers; he ran his tongue along his lips. "You're bluffing!"

"Maybe," Corb admitted.

Silence came, so loud that it was a buzz in Corb's ears, a silence with only the lamp spluttering and Teague staring at him like a crazy man and once in a while a stick popping in the stove. Out of that silence, Corb said, "I saw this happen to a man once—a Swede who'd lived alone too long. When we got there, it was too late."

Teague said, "Damn you!" and began cussing Corb out again in a flat, dreary voice.

Corb said, "Maybe I'm bluffing, Teague. Maybe that grinding in your belly is just because you drank hot coffee too fast. Or maybe it's because you're hungry. The bacon's getting cold. But you can't make your hand move for you, eh? You can't make it lift a fork. Try it, Teague!"

Teague carefully laid the gun beside his plate, his eyes frantic, fear holding him good and tight now.

Teague moved his hand toward the gun. "Before I go, I'll see you kicking on the floor with a bullet in you!"

He reached out quickly and shoved the gun toward Corb. "Mix up that medicine!"

Corb reached out very carefully and got the gun. He looked at Teague; the wild fear in Teague wasn't pretty. Corb knew then that Doc Boucher had been wrong about a man being afraid to live when he got afraid to die. Half wrong, anyway. Everyone knew fear when they faced the man with the axe. The difference was how you faced him—standing up as Corb had stood up to curly McCandless, or making wild talk in your whiskers like Teague was doing now.

Corb turned the gun over in his hand. He jacked the bullets from it and went to the door and opened it, flinging the shells in one direction, the gun in another. He turned and looked at Teague and said, "I didn't use the strychnine."

That brought Teague out of his chair

again, his face savage and all his bulk poised, and Corb thought that now they were even. He reckoned Teague would come rushing at him, and he was stiffened against that onslaught. Then he saw Teague die. Not from the strychnine that hadn't been used; not from the gun that hadn't been fired. The heart died in Teague; the courage of the man curled up like bacon in a frying pan.

Teague said, "Damn you!" but there was no iron in it.

It left Corb with the laughter bubbling up in him. By grab, the gun hadn't mattered—not ever—and that meant the badge hadn't mattered either, or the reputation. He had been stripped bare when he had bested Teague. Put one man against another and the strong man came through. Teague's defeat was the proof.

Corb went again to the door and opened it and had his look out. That black wind had risen to the west, and the sky was less overcast and a ghostly moon showed, making the snow all sparkly. It was a night for riding, and with hard pushing he could see the false fronts of Genesee, come sunup.

He turned to Teague. "Outside, short-horn," he said.

He put his knee to the seat of Teague's pants as he headed the man through the doorway, just to keep Teague minded who was boss. Finney wouldn't have any trouble keeping Teague under lock and key a second time. Teague had done all the running he was ever going to do. But the thing that made Corb feel good—the thing he'd be telling Doc Boucher about—was that he, too, had ended his running. Catching a fugitive, he had ceased to be one himself.

Outside, he drew in the cold, crisp air. He reckoned that ranching on a little place like Pete Shipley's wouldn't tie up all a man's time. If Finney needed a hand at lawing Genesee, Corb Coultis was his man.

I'LL SLUG



CHAPTER ONE

Gunhand's River

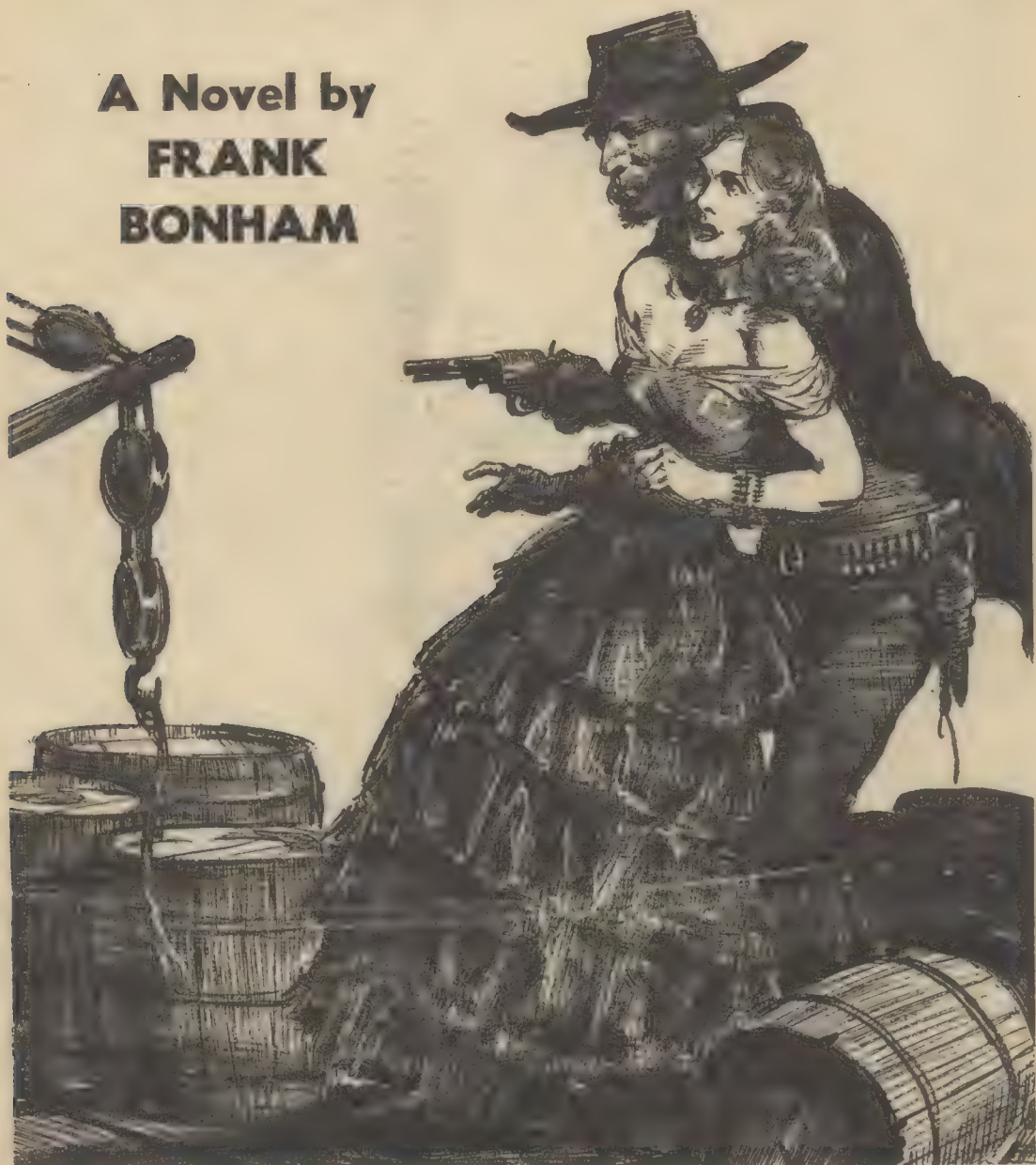
A FEW miles below Owl Spring, Corrigan began to worry about the girl. She had boarded at Yuma the night before, paid passage to Owl Spring, and disappeared into her cabin. At dusk

he had knocked at her door and asked if she would like some mosquito netting to drape over her bed, and she had said yes, and opened the door an inch to accept it. This was the whole of their conversation in a hundred and eighty miles and sixteen hours.

Now they were approaching the last wood-stop below Owl Spring, head of

MY WAY TO HELL!

A Novel by
**FRANK
BONHAM**



Corrigan turned to find him using Margaret as a shield. . . .

Colorado River navigation. From the wheelhouse of the lumbering old *Betsy*, Corrigan watched her standing by the rail. She had a nice figure and a particularly nice back, the long gray skirt enhancing a small waist, but it looked to Corrigan like a very disconsolate back, and Owl

“Mister, there’s only one way to settle who’ll run this town . . . and that’s the gun way. I’ll match you blood for blood, bullet for bullet—and when we’re done one of us will go downriver—and the other’ll go to hell!”

Spring would do nothing to make it any less so.

Winfree, the pilot, stepped the wheel around with a muttered oath. "Only thing you can count on about this river is that you can't count on it," he said. They ground over a spit of gravel.

The river was a ruddy alley between low, eroded cliffs. Willows and sycamores hedged it with dark greenery, but beyond the bosque were the pebbly hills of the Mojave Desert. The earth was a rubble from which every drop of moisture had been sucked by the sun.

Corrigan grunted a word to the pilot and left the wheelhouse. He descended creaking steps to the boiler deck, descended another flight to the main deck and walked forward. He was a large, deeply-tanned man who wore dark trousers and a white shirt, and a black master's cap on the back of his head. His hair was sandy and crisp, and his face was Irish, but without an Irishman's humor. A panhandler would look at Corrigan's mouth and put his hand back in his pocket.

He stopped beside the girl and leaned on the railing. "Pretty rough old country," he said.

She looked at him, and then back at the cliffs. "I suppose one gets used to it."

"I don't. I don't know anyone who does. Most people only stay here because of business. Or health."

This brought no comment, and Corrigan made a sidelong appraisal of her. The small, regular features were sad. There is something about sadness in a woman which arouses a man, and Corrigan had an instant's ambition toward a friendship, in this country where friendship was rare.

She was Irish, of course—with a name like Margaret McCormick she could be nothing else—and had fair skin and hair that was a rich red-brown. He noticed that her hands were small.

"Miss McCormick," he said, "forgive me if I'm forward—but I was wondering

whether you knew anyone in Owl Spring. We have no hotel there, you know."

"Oh, yes! I have an uncle. The relative with whom I was living in the East died. I've come out to keep house for my uncle."

Surprised, Corrigan said, "I wonder if I know him? I know most everyone up here."

"Shawn McCormick. He was in transportation, he told us a year ago. I haven't heard from him lately, but I assume he still is."

Corrigan's pulses stopped and his jaw loosened a little, and the girl, selecting that moment to look at him, said quickly, "You do know him, then!"

Ira Corrigan did not know whether to deny knowledge of Shawn McCormick or to admit the truth. He decided on the truth, since it would come out anyway.

"As a matter of fact, he works for me," he told her.

"Why, how nice!" He saw the coolness in her eyes melt at once; he saw a tenseness in her ease, and knew she had probably worn that armor all the way from the East, fearful of conversation with strange men. "He never mentioned steamboats," she said. "I supposed he was with a stage company or something."

"He's—he's in the office," Corrigan said. He had started to light a cigar, but put it back in his shirt pocket and turned from the rail. "I'll see that you find him all right," he told her. "We'll make Owl Spring in about two hours."

She looked bewildered as he walked brusquely back up the deck.

Dammit, he thought, why did I ever open my mouth? If he had let her find things out for herself, he'd have been out of it. Now he was obligated to pilot her through what was going to be a very sour situation, and probably take her back to Yuma by the next boat.

They were approaching a peninsula that ran out into the river from a sharp bend. On the sandbar a dozen men were

gathered beside a few ricks of wood. Winfree sounded a long blast of the whistle and began to head in for the wood-stop. It was Saturday and the woodcutters would come aboard with the wood. They had put in six days cutting wood and the last of the bad liquor they had taken on last weekend was sweated out. Corrigan paid an average of five dollars a head on them at the jail Monday mornings; at a dollar a day, they would have two dollars pay coming, above the bail he had put out.

He said quickly to the pilot, "Pass them up."

Winfree shot a glance back at him. "But this is—"

"I said pass them up!"

Winfree straightened up, but he said, "It's Saturday, Captain. They're due to go back. And I ain't sure we've got enough wood to make it."

"We'll make it. I checked when I was down. A little walk won't hurt them."

Corrigan had a reputation for hardness, and the glint in the pilot's eyes said that one more story about him would soon be put in circulation. Corrigan knew it and was resentful, because his passing the men up was in the nature of philanthropy. He had nothing to gain by it, except the hope that he could rig up some kind of story about Shawn McCormick before his niece got a look at him, because Shawn was one of his regulars. There was nothing surer in the world than that Shawn would start drinking Saturday night, get in a fight Sunday and spend the night in jail, and be bailed out to Ira Corrigan Monday morning. . . .

It was an accepted economic institution in this country, but how would he ever make a girl from Massachusetts or Vermont, or somewhere, understand that?

OWL SPRING was on a delta at the mouth of Sand Canyon. It occupied the southeast bank, and consisted of a few mean huts of rock and

mud and a straggling main street. The town subsisted on traffic from the gold mines a few miles east and a desultory trade in mining equipment, hides, tallow, and wool. Indians roamed the street looking for jobs not involving work, miners came in to get drunk, drummers now and then disembarked for a few days to peddle worthless nostrums and wooden nutmegs. No one came to Owl Spring for any good.

But Margaret McCormick had come here to keep house for her uncle, who had no house.

As they warped in to the dock, Corrigan saw something which caused him to take his cigar out of his mouth and stare at a wharf a hundred yards up Sand Canyon. Ore barges laden with dusty fines rocked lazily on the brown surface of the stream. They were not Corrigan's barges, because all of his were strung out along his own wharf.

"Do you see that?" he said to Winfree.

"Yep," the pilot said.

"Someone thinks he's going to haul some ore," Corrigan said.

"Must be the independents."

"No. That's Blount's wharf."

He belted on a revolver, as he always did before entering a town, but this time it seemed to have a particular significance. Hugh Blount had been crying for six months about Corrigan's overcharging his Mojave Mining Company. Corrigan got a five percent cut out of every ton of ore that went down the river to the mills, and this, he knew, was what really hurt the mine boss. Corrigan's gamble in shoving transportation through did not count, now that it was an established fact. But Corrigan remembered when old heads on the river told him he was a fool to throw his money away trying to navigate the upper Colorado.

He had taken advantage of the last hour to brush his trousers, shave, and rub the leather visor of his cap. Now he presented himself at the door of Margaret McCor-

mick's cabin. She opened it, a carpet bag in her hand, her trunk packed and locked in the center of the room behind her. She was a very pert little creature, he thought, and the excited shine in her eyes made her whole face glow.

"You've made me feel a lot better about all this," she confided. "To tell the truth, I was beginning to be a little worried! It wouldn't have surprised me much if Uncle Shawn had moved on. He never was one to stay in one place long."

Corrigan rubbed the back of his neck with his palm. "He's here, all right. But I was going to suggest that you stay on the boat a while. Shawn's not much of a housekeeper. I'll get someone to sweep out before you move in."

She shook her head, smiling. "I've handled a broom before, Captain."

Corrigan looked beyond her, somehow unable to lie to those blue eyes with the faint shadows beneath them. "You see, we've got fleas out here," he said. "The Indians have a way of smoking them out. Give me a couple of hours and I'll have everything in shape."

It was clear that she was disappointed, but she gave in. "It really isn't necessary, but if you think it best—"

"I do," Corrigan said solemnly.

He strolled down to the wharf with the hot sun on his back. He walked up the sultry main street, considering all the possibilities. He recalled the sheet-metal shed behind Coke's wood yard, where hides were stored occasionally. He spoke to the wood dealer about this and they went out and looked it over.

The shed was of sheet-metal, blazing hot within, rusted without. It had no windows and only a sagging door with no lock. It comprised two tiny rooms. Coke, seeing a chance to gouge a man who had done some gouging himself, said, "I'd want twenty a month for it, Ira."

"All right. I'll send up a bed and table. And if you can get a woman to clean it

up, I will pay you two dollars more."

Fifty cents a day was the going rate for squaws, and Coke looked surprised. Corrigan wasn't a man to fling money riotously about. In fact, he was a little surprised himself at what he was doing.

Back on the wharf, Corrigan began feeling sorry for the wood gang and sent a wagon after them. It was twelve miles and they would be half the night straggling in. Then he went up to the levee of Hugh Blount's Mojave Mining Corporation wharf. A twenty-mule team from the mines had just come jingling in with four big ore wagons trailing dust and sifting tawny trails of powdery ore. Swampers were letting the first wagon cautiously down the slope onto the wharf. A half-empty barge rocked sluggishly on the water.

The wharf master started when he saw the big white-shirted boatman standing in the shade of the wharf-house. Corrigan stood watching him until the man walked up the slope. Men were accustomed to handling Corrigan with the reluctant respect accorded a shotgun. He stood a couple of inches under six feet, but he was thickly made, his neck and torso strong and his hands large and rough. Corrigan's gaze was frank and devoid of foolishness. His philosophy was in his manner: He had little patience and no tolerance for weakness.

"Good trip, Corrigan?" the wharf master asked him. He was a short, wiry man with skin baked almost black by the desert sun and eyes two shades too light for his face.

Corrigan said, "Good enough." He nodded at the line of ore barges. "Do you want those picked up in the morning?"

Neff, the dockman, made an overly casual gesture. "Oh, those? They won't go out for a while."

"Why not? They're all loaded but the last, aren't they?"

Neff's eyes roamed up the street, as if

looking for someone. "I haven't got the word yet, Ira. You talk to Daggmeyer about it."

Daggmeyer, the local assayer, was secretary of the independent miners of Owl Spring. "Why Daggmeyer?" Corrigan asked. "They're Blount's wagons. It's Blount's ore. What's Daggmeyer got to do with it?"

Neff shook his head, a harassed look in his eyes. "Don't ask me about it. I only work here." Then he said, "The independents built the barges while you were down river. They figure to let the current take them down, I think. I guess they're renting some of them to Blount."

After a moment, Corrigan said: "Thanks." He walked back up the street in the late afternoon sun.

So Blount is going to hide behind the independents' skirts! he thought. With the blessing of the independents on his ore, nothing could happen to it. He was only one, even if the biggest one in Mojave Desert mining, but they were thirty or forty. Corrigan wouldn't dare touch him, allied with them. So he thought.

CORRIGAN had known the kind of man with whom he was dealing when he agreed to scrape, dredge or shove steamboat transportation to Owl Spring two years ago. He knew others had attempted the upper river and failed. He knew Blount was willing to let him risk his capital in the venture, having nothing to lose, so he fashioned a contract accordingly. Ore would be shipped for ten dollars a ton to Port Isabel, at the mouth of the Colorado on the Gulf. Coastwise windjammers would take it on to San Francisco from there. Blount agreed to this and, after an all-night drinking and arguing session, consented to give Corrigan five per cent of the net profit of his mines for his risk.

Blount was nailed down on that contract like a butterfly on a paper. Know-

ing him, Corrigan realized he had planned on squirming out of it or bulling his way out. He had gone through the businessman's entire bag of tricks during the last year and seen them all fail. But now he had a new angle. . . .

Corrigan tramped up the loose, dry earth of the roadway to the office of Blount's Mojave Mining Company. Blount was not in. He went over to the independent miners' hall, which consisted of a small stone building at the side of a sizeable corral. A few ore wagons were ranged about the open land beyond the corral. The stone house served as a hiring hall and business office for the independents, who owned their wagons and mules collectively. But neither Blount nor Gus Daggmeyer, assayer and secretary of the independent miners, was there.

Owl Spring had several saloons, most of them dim and odorous *cantinas*, in the Mexican tradition, but a couple were decent enough. Corrigan picked the Ounce Diggings, and knew as soon as he entered that he had chosen the right one. Hugh Blount's deep, common-sense voice was preaching quietly somewhere in the dusk of smoke and liquor smells.

No one but the bald-headed man behind the bar saw Corrigan enter. This man stopped dipping beer mugs in a pail of dirty water to wait on him. "Rye," Corrigan said.

Murphy, the saloonkeeper, poured the whiskey carefully right to the brim, not spilling a drop. "Are you boycotting me?" he asked. "Where are my lads?"

"Missed 'em," Corrigan smiled. "They'll be along sometime tonight, and thirstier than the devil."

"Ah!" Murphy said.

At the table sat Blount and Daggmeyer and three others, one of whom was young Tom Hall, biggest of the independent miners. Hall was one of the few in this town who had Corrigan's respect, a sincere and aggressive young fellow whose fault was

that he had more sail than ballast. Experience would remedy that.

Hall was in the act of beating the table with his fist and saying, "By Mighty, he can't buck this whole town! Nobody's big enough for that."

"Sure of that?" Corrigan said.

Hall's blunt features stared blankly at him. He sat there deflating, and Hugh Blount raised his voice quietly. "I'm glad you came, Ira. Have a seat. We're talking about you."

"I thought it must be somebody else," Corrigan said. "You all sounded so tough."

He sat with them, finished his liquor and refilled from their bottle. Blount looked at him, a ruddy, deep-bodied man with indolent eyes and thin black hair which was always mussed. "Ira, this can be the beginning of better understanding for all of us. Or it can be the start of trouble." He spoke soberly, a little too soberly, with the meticulous care of one who has drunk an hour too long. "Which is it going to be?"

"That depends on whether you try to ship ore by anybody but me," Corrigan said.

"That's what I had in mind."

"Then don't expect me to try to understand you any better," Corrigan said. "I understand you pretty well, anyway. Well enough not to be surprised at your sucking in a lot of other men to stand the gaff with you, when they've got nothing to win."

Hall snapped, "We're making our fight now instead of later. It's just a question of time until you try to get a cut of our business or double rates on us."

"Is that you talking, or Blount?" Corrigan asked.

Hall's eyes snapped. He was about twenty-five, hot-tempered and tough, and afraid of no one. He started to rise, but Gus Daggmeyer tapped the table twice with his knuckles. "Tommy," he said.

Hall looked at him and slowly sat down.

Daggmeyer's broad features were the only ones at the table which were temperate and controlled. He was a stubby man of middle age, with crisp gray hair, alert brown eyes and a big, snag-toothed mouth like that of a channel cat.

"There doesn't have to be trouble," he said. "I guess we've kind of adopted Blount's fight as our own. I know if I were paying somebody a thousand a month to haul ore for me, I'd kick like a bay steer over cutting him in for five percent of the business."

"Yet he thought that was fair enough at the time. In fact," Corrigan said, glancing at Blount, "you seemed surprised that I'd tackle it. No wonder! Somebody'd gone broke trying to operate a boat over the same course six months before. I found that out, though you never mentioned it. You thought I'd probably go under, too, but you were willing to gamble—with my money."

"But if I'd failed, I'd be skinning mules for somebody in Bisbee now, like I was two years ago. I backed the double-zero, Blount, and now I'm rolling in blue chips and loving it. I get the impression from the cigars you smoke that you aren't feeling any pain, either."

Blount's thick, round fingers picked up and handled a deck of cards. "Do you want the whole story?" he asked Corrigan.

Corrigan waited. His temper was not a long suffering one, and its nettles were prickling along the back of his neck right now.

"It's not just our contract the men are sore about," Blount told him. "It's the way you do business, from start to finish. Where do you get your workmen? At the jail. You dump them back in the saloons Saturday night and let them drink themselves into jail again by Monday morning. Then you go their fines and you've got them for another week."

"I've seen you get muckers there," Corrigan retorted.

"Once or twice, in a pinch," Blount admitted. "But I don't keep them on the treadmill, the way you do. And I don't work the life out of my men. You haven't a man you could keep if they could get other jobs out here."

"They're not under contract," Corrigan snapped.

THE MINERS looked at each other, as if the answer did not please them, and Corrigan secretly was not proud of it himself. Yet it expressed a philosophy that had been growing on him for the last ten years, years in which he worked for other men until he reached the conclusion that employers were merely someone to hold a man's arms behind his back while storekeepers pummelled him.

The Colorado, and the *Betsy*, were a destiny he had traveled two thousand miles to find. He had had two years in the Army of the Potomac, and had gone back to a town where men half-jokingly wished the war had lasted another year, they had done so well on it, and where there was no work for a half-schooled boy of nineteen.

He worked his way to Arizona Territory, mule-skinning and mucking. Then he heard of a copper strike in the Black Mountains and was one of the first to drive

his stakes. When his ledge ran out, he had saved eleven thousand dollars. Ira Corrigan was top dog at last. He wanted to put that money to work, but knew better than to tackle commerce, about which he knew nothing.

It would have to be something that was first cousin to gambling. He found it in Yuma, in a decaying hulk called the *Betsy*, which had been abandoned after blowing a head. She was a low-water wonder, however, and when Corrigan heard of the mines at Owl Spring having to ship every ton of freight to Port Isabel by wagon, he decided opportunity was knocking.

This was how Corrigan and Hugh Blount made connections. During the first year, Corrigan was popular enough. Then the poison of Blount's talk began to be circulated, a drop at a time, until Corrigan was the black dog of Owl Spring.

He knew his workmen considered him hard; he knew they would have quit him in a minute for the three dollars a day they could have made in the mines, if there had been work for them. But Corrigan had brought to his work only the tricks learned when he was the underdog.

Tom Hall was saying, "If you'd ever mucked for a living, the way most of us have—"

"Who said I hadn't?" Corrigan said with a dry grin. "And I've swamped wagons for fourteen-hour stretches, for a dol-

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lar and a half. I pay my men all they're worth, and the grub they get on my boat is better than you'll buy in any restaurant in this town."

"So you can work them harder?" Daggmeyer grinned with a tilt of his large head.

"Maybe," Corrigan said.

Hugh Blount was not amused. "This is my last offer to you, Corrigan. I'll buy that contract back for five thousand dollars. After that you carry my ore for the usual rate, but you take your hand out of my pocket for good."

Corrigan finished his drink and stood up. "That contract is worth fifteen hundred a month to me. But I can remember when it wasn't worth a dime. I had no assurance when I tackled this streak of mud that you'd be mining gold for more than a week. You've been lucky, and so have I. Why don't we just keep it that way?"

Blount's face was the color of well-hung beef, and his fingers strained around his whiskey glass. "I've torn up my copy of the agreement. You might as well do the same. I'm trying to let you down easy, Corrigan, but one of these days I'll turn this town loose on you. A story's been going around that you and the marshal have an agreement. If any of your regulars don't get drunk enough to land in the jug, the marshal sees that they get there anyway. Makes money for both of you. But it's kind of tough on the Shawn McCormicks."

Corrigan's hand picked up the deck of cards which Blount had put down. Blount had spoken plainly, and the faces of the others showed their reactions to it. Daggmeyer frowned and glanced at the mine boss, and Tom Hall regarded Corrigan challengingly.

"Always joking," Corrigan said.

Blount said, "No. I'm not joking."

Corrigan's wrist made a short, swift motion and the deck of cards flashed into Blount's face. The deck was new and the

edge of the cards struck him on the bridge of the nose with the impact of a solid block of wood. Then the cards exploded and rained down all over him, while Blount rose hastily, putting his hand over his cut nose.

His chair crashed on the floor. He came around behind Daggmeyer and grabbed at Corrigan's shirt, throwing a short sidearm punch at Corrigan's face. Corrigan caught his wrist. Blount came up against him and Corrigan felt the jolt of his body. He shoved his fist into Blount's belly. Blount gasped and tried to pull away, but Corrigan struck him on the side of the jaw with a clean, hard smash.

Blount stumbled blindly into Daggmeyer, who caught him and let him slump to the floor. Blount came to his knees, but he was out of it.

Corrigan said quietly, "I'm a prideful man, Blount. I'll always rise to that kind of bait. I'll pick up those barges any time you say."

CHAPTER TWO

Midnight Shootout

AN HOUR before sundown, Corrigan inspected the shed. It had been swept and scrubbed, cots had been moved into both rooms and a table and a couple of chairs from the *Betsy* installed; but it still had a faint odor of hides and it suffered from the absence of windows. He shook his head in dissatisfaction and walked down the street.

He had Margaret's trunk moved up to the shack and just at dark he walked her up to it. There was no way he could hide her disappointment at the bareness of the room. "It's not much," Corrigan said, "but rentals are pretty scarce in this town."

She brushed back a wisp of hair from her forehead. "It—it's all right," she said. "After all, men aren't supposed to know

how to keep house anyway, are they?"

She smiled, a tired smile in a small, weary face. She looked as though the heat were getting at her, and Corrigan hoped she would get out of this devil's sink before long. It was not a climate to improve the dispositions and beauty of women.

"I'll bring your uncle up as soon as he comes in," he told her.

It was about nine when the wagon returned with Corrigan's wood-cutters. He was there before the Ounce Diggings to clap a hand on Shawn McCormick's shoulder. "Want to talk to you, Shawn." He paid the men the difference between their fines and what they had earned. Then he put two gold eagles in Shawn's hand.

Shawn stared at them, and then his big hand clamped convulsively on the coins. "It's even money!" he said. "You thought they were cartwheels, did you? This pays for makin' us walk half the way in, Corrigan! I'll be setting the boys up with these."

He was a great-shouldered Irishman with the make and apologetic manner of a sheep dog. He had a blacksmith's arm and a chin to shape horseshoes on; his stiff, sandy hair hung over his forehead and his eyes were light blue and easily turned by a stronger man's stare. The story was that he had been General Dodge's best spiker, before he turned his energies to drinking.

"I knew what I was giving you," Corrigan said. "They're advance against salary. You've got expenses coming up, man."

Shawn stared out from under his rough blond brows as if he suspected ridicule.

"Have you a niece named Margaret?" Corrigan asked.

Shawn's eyes took the blow. He put a hand on Corrigan's arm. "Oh, Lord—*she* ain't in town?"

"She came up with me from Yuma."

Shawn began talking faster than he could think. "Look, Corrigan—you've more or less got me into this, and you can

help me out of it. Tell her I've gone to San Francisco, do you hear? Tell her I had the promise of a—a position there, and she's to—"

It ran out in the slow shaking of Corrigan's head. "She's here to stay a while. I fixed her up in the shed behind Coke's woodyard. That's your home, understand? And you work in the office for me. What office? Don't ask me. . . We'll give her a week and maybe the heat or the mosquitoes will beat her. Then you can send her back East, or—well, it's your problem. And I wouldn't want it."

McCormick wiped his sweating forehead with his sleeve. Suddenly he turned to the slatted doors of the saloon. "We'll see if we can find the answer to this in a cup, lad."

Corrigan halted him. "Not a dime of that goes for liquor. You'll have things to buy for the shack, and you'll have to feed her at the restaurant. She can't live on whiskey, like you. You get up there, and remember our story. We'll see what works out."

Shawn made an ironic grin. "Faith, I never looked for a temperance lecture from you. Nor for charity, either. Ah," he said, "it's the colleen, ain't it? She'd be quite a young lady by now, and with her mother's hair, that was purer gold than this."

"She's all of that," Corrigan said. "That's why we've got to do what we can to ease her out of here."

He went down to the boat and by lamplight in the wheelhouse, where there was a cross-draft, read a month-old Tucson newspaper. He smoked steadily on a black briar pipe, trying to discourage the mosquitoes that rose in thick, stinging clouds from the river. The night heat was a damp, clinging blanket.

Corrigan stood at the wheel and gazed into the night towards Blount's wharf. Indistinctly the gloom held a pattern of six long barges with low mounds of ore. He thought, *It will be tonight, sure.* Then an

idea crossed his mind and he decided, *I'll be damned if I'll stay up all night waiting for it.*

He went below and found a brass engineer's bell in a bin of odds and ends with which the engineer compounded the magic that spirited a tub like the *Betsy* over eighteen inches of water with a load of seventy tons. He located a small keg, affixed the bell to the top of it, and secured a few feet of line. He rowed quietly to mid-channel and was back in a few moments.

He spoke to the fireman. "Keep up some steam, Jake. We may make a little run tonight."

Sometime after midnight he heard the bell clang once, then stroke vigorously several times and suddenly choke off. Corrigan piled off the cot in the pilothouse, where he slept. From the windows, he heard the slap-slapping of water under flat bows. In the humid star-shine the long line of barges slipped silently toward the river. A man huddled over a tiller at the stern of the last barge, and a dozen men with poles struggled among the other scows.

Winfree came up the companionway from his cabin, shirtless. "What's the matter?" he demanded.

Corrigan yanked a leather pull and a bell jingled in the belly of the boat. "We're casting off."

"We've got no cargo!" Winfree exclaimed.

"We're going to pick one up." Corrigan showed him the train of ore-barges. "Swing around ahead of them. I'll give them a chance to tie on before I sink them."

"Sink them?"

Corrigan said, "I'm not paying you to worry, mister. If you don't want to follow orders, say so now, before we start. You can probably find another boat to pilot in another year or two."

Winfree silently threw off the tie that

held the big walnut wheel. They were off!

CORRIGAN went down to the main deck. The hot night whispered with movement; it held its breath and listened. At any moment it seemed ready to erupt into violence. He heard the rousters casting off lines and now the boat trembled to the growl and whine of machinery. There was a watery threshing from the stern as the buckets began to pull through the brown water. The *Betsy* angled into the light pull of the current and began to swing about.

Corrigan carried a carbine. He stood behind a winch as they began to slide past the ore-barges. In his mind he tried to figure how far Blount would go if his bluff were called. He did not think he would go to the extent of firing on the steamboat, but Blount was a man of reserves that one could only guess at.

The boat slid along. Suddenly a man yelled, "Try and stop us, you dirty slaver!" A rock arched across the glinting alley of water and bounced on the deck. Corrigan made no reply, and stood there as they pulled abreast of the first barge. As he had expected, he detected neither Gus Daggmeyer nor Blount, but in the first barge he saw Tom Hall bending staunchly to a pole. They were entering the swift current of the Colorado, and as the barges began to rush along, Hall raised his pole and Corrigan saw him turn toward the steamboat.

"Don't be a catspaw, Tom," Corrigan called. "I'll haul your ore for the regular rate any time. What have you to win by bucking me?"

Hall laid the pole the length of the barge but did not reply. "If you're not being made a fool of," Corrigan continued, "where is Blount? Isn't he man enough to make his own fight?"

Hall's shoulders moved. Corrigan sensed what was happening but he could not tell which way to move, and suddenly some-

thing crashed against the side of his head and he fell heavily on the deck. He lay there a few moments with a cold vacancy in him. Then awareness surged back to him with a rush. He came onto his knees, snapping the carbine to his shoulder. Something said to him, *Not that way*. As full consciousness came, he lowered the gun. He stood up, a warmth of blood on the left side of his head.

He called to Hall. "Are you armed?"

"Only with guts," Hall snapped.

Corrigan said, "I'm coming over. Are you man enough to fight me alone?"

Hall laughed. "Don't come unless you can swim."

Corrigan shouted an order up to Winfree. The *Betsy* veered toward the barges until her guards shouldered the lead barge. Corrigan jumped to the rugged surface of the ore. Hall came at him in a rush. His head was down, so that Corrigan's fist sledged against the top of it with more damage to his knuckles than to Hall.

By the force of this attack, Hall flung him on his back. The younger, shorter man seemed filled with a sort of holy rage. He dropped to his knees and began sledging at Ira Corrigan's head, connecting with his cheek in a larruping blow which stunned the boatman. Corrigan fought by instinct, reaching up to get the miner by the throat and hitching around until he was on his knees. That way, face to face, they chopped at each other until both were cut and winded. They arose warily and circled slowly.

Corrigan respected the tough, blunt-featured young miner for his courage and industry in carrying the fight to him, but he had his measure, now. Hall wasted half his power in grunting and swearing. He was strong but didn't know how to make his strength work for him.

Corrigan panted, "I don't want to fight you, Hall. Tie on and I'll take you down in the morning. We'll tell Blount he's on his own."

Hall gave him a bloody grin. "You don't want to fight anybody you can't lick, do you? You're not fighting Blount this time."

He swung heavily at Corrigan's head. Corrigan ducked it. Hall stabbed at his face and the boatman's shoulder took the punch. Swearing, Hall lunged at him.

Corrigan gathered the whole force of his body and put it into a single smash at Tom Hall's jaw. It hit Hall with the flat smack of an open-handed slap, but it carried the full weight of a strong man's shoulder. Hall went back, his arms flung wide, and stumbled in the loose earth and went down. He rolled over on his face and tried to get up. Then he slumped and lay quiet.

Corrigan went to the gunwale and dipped up handfuls of water to slosh over his head. The water was cold, shocking him into consciousness of the things about him. Men were yelling from the other barges and a rock landed softly in the ore beside him. Corrigan walked to the stern of the barge. He paused to hurl a couple of rocks at the two men in the following barge. Then he knelt and cut through the heavy manila lashing the two barges together.

He returned to the steamboat and went up to the wheelhouse. When he looked down, Hall's barge had floated a few feet ahead of the others. Hall, Corrigan speculated, would come around in a half-hour or so and pole it ashore. The others were going ashore much more quickly.

He said to Winfree, "Let me have the wheel." The pilot relinquished it and Corrigan got the feel of the big smooth spokes before he swung the boat and let her flat bow, sloping back like the underjaw of a bulldog, walk up on the first barge. Men began to yell, a shotgun roared and buckshot peppered the windows of the wheelhouse. A glass pane shattered startlingly in the heavy quiet of the room.

Corrigan, a half-smile on his lips, watched the overloaded barge tilt and be-

gin to ship water. He kept the *Betsy* at quarter speed, pushing the barge along while it took on water. The near rail dipped deeply, the far one rose higher and higher until suddenly the whole barge slipped quietly and gently underwater.

Men threshed frantically back to the next barge. Corrigan backed off the steam-wheeler and came at it at half-speed, the bow waves sloshing briskly. He put the barge under in a single rush.

When he had finished, there remained only thick swirls of muddy water, a dozen bobbing heads, and, far downriver, the slowly twisting patch on the water that was Tom Hall's barge.

CHAPTER THREE

Hellbound

AT TEN o'clock the next morning, Margaret McCormick appeared on the wharf. Corrigan was suddenly conscious of not having shaved. He changed to a clean shirt and rubbed his boots, and went down from the texas to meet her. She wore a light summer dress and carried a parasol. She looked less uncertain than the day before, fresh and dainty with a kind of daintiness Corrigan had forgotten.

He invited her aboard and she accepted a cup of coffee in the saloon. Corrigan frowned at the stained red-and-white tablecloth. She had many questions to ask about the town. Corrigan expanded a bit in the role of authority. She laughed at the jokes he made and her laughter was music in that dingy hall.

But in the back of his mind a dark face grinned sardonically at the spectacle of Ira Corrigan, hard-fisted boatman, believer in nothing but the virtue of power, toying with the idea of a romance with a niece of Shawn McCormick! When she found out about Shawn, she would be down here to blister the hide off him.

"What I really came down for," Margaret said finally, "was to find my uncle. He left before I was up."

Corrigan visualized the ocean of liquor twenty dollars would buy in Owl Spring, and wondered if they would ever get Shawn sober again. "Why—I suppose he met someone in the saloon, and they got to talking," he said.

"On Sunday?" Margaret demanded.

"You sort of lose track of days out here," Corrigan smiled.

"I suppose so. I—I hope Uncle Shawn hasn't been drinking too much?" she said in concern.

"Not to my knowledge," Corrigan said.

Margaret rose to leave. She said, standing at the head of the landing stage, spinning her parasol, "I suppose you have a church of some kind?"

"I believe," said Corrigan, "that the Mexicans have a little rock church up the street. But I don't think you would understand the service."

A firmness entered her face. "It's good to know there is some kind of religion here," she said as she rose to leave.

He watched her go down the landing stage, then he called, "There's a nice walk up Sand Canyon, if you feel like walking. Shade all the way, and a spring about a half mile up."

When she disappeared, she was walking in that direction.

Corrigan strode up the street to the Ounce Diggings Bar and pushed through the door. The place was crowded with the smells and clamor of several-score miners. Immediately Corrigan saw that Shawn McCormick had indeed partaken. He and a Cousin Jack from the mines were squared off in the middle of a circle of yelling men, both of them shirtless, both bruised and bloodied.

Corrigan pulled men out of his way as he went in. He stood there and broke up an incipient round of swinging with a shout. "Shawn!"

The big Irishman turned on him. He did not drink well, and he advanced with a slow, shuffling movement toward Corrigan with savagery in his red eyes. Corrigan made a sign to the bartender. "You dirty sod!" Shawn rumbled. "I've had enough of your pratin' and preachin'. Put up your hands!"

Corrigan side-stepped a thunderous swing. He pushed Shawn and the big man slipped to the floor. Shawn came up roaring like a bull, starting on a stumbling run for the boatman. At this moment the bartender slipped in quietly and tapped McCormick behind the ear with a bung-starter. Shawn sighed and several men were there to catch him as he fell.

Corrigan told the bartender, "Let him sleep it off in the back room. Then send him up to Shorty's for a shave and a bath. He'll know where to go after that."

"All right. Say," Murphy added, "an old friend was looking for you. Gus Daggmeyer. He said he'd be at the shop all day."

Corrigan stood in the street in the yellow blaze of the desert heat. If he'd had an ounce of sense, he'd have known he could never put it over. Shawn was a rum-fighter; a veteran like Shawn couldn't leave the stuff alone for a week without walking up the walls.

He walked up the Daggmeyer's assay office. A small voice of caution whispered to him that he might find more than just Daggmeyer there. Tom Hall would be raging up and down the town today and likely Hugh Blount was waiting with some special club. But when he went into the small adobe building, Corrigan saw only the assayer's thick form at a bench in the rear.

The building was insufferably hot. It was clamorous with the pounding of a compressor and the roar of a brick furnace in the middle of the room. Daggmeyer did not see him until Corrigan stood beside him where he was pounding slag from

a bit of metal on the anvil. He smiled and raised his hand. "Be with you in a minute, Ira!"

Ira. Corrigan thought about that as he went to stand in the back door in the comparative coolness of a hundred and ten degrees. He was accustomed to picking up every out-of-character trait a man showed and trying to fit it into the picture he had of him. That "Ira" business didn't fit.

Behind the shop was a bench. They went out and sat in the shade. Daggmeyer sat with his heavy legs outspread. Rills of sweat coursed the thick hair of his chest.

"What's on your mind?" Corrigan asked him. Something about him always made Corrigan frown. There was a furtiveness about this man who had the reputation of having grubstaked many a miner, who was called Uncle Gus by the miners. He showed you a crusty but kindly manner, but Corrigan could not accept him.

"Quite a doings last night," Daggmeyer said.

"You asked for it."

"They asked for it. I didn't. They're fools, Ira, headlong fools. I can't reach them any more."

"You seemed to be reaching them all right yesterday."

Daggmeyer spread his hands. "I'm their mouthpiece. I argue with them in private, but in public all I can say is what they tell me."

Corrigan shrugged. "Sorry I can't get warmed up over your troubles, Gus. But I've got my own."

"And it looks," Daggmeyer said, "as if they'd keep on getting worse. You could fight Blount alone, or you could fight us, but I don't think you can fight us both and win."

CORRIGAN got up. "It's a hundred and ten in the shade," he said, "and two hundred yards from the wharf to this bake oven of yours. Don't

send for me again unless you've got something to say."

Daggmeyer drew on the pipe, smiling faintly. "My, my," he said. "And me wanting to help you out of a tough spot. Me with fifty thousand dollars to lay in your lap."

Corrigan grinned. "Excuse me if I was impatient."

"That's better." Daggmeyer strolled to the corner of the building and looked up and down the street. He returned to glance in the door and resumed his place beside the boatman.

"The only way you're going to get out of this with a profit is to take the independents out of it. For instance, if there was a stamp mill and reducer here, they wouldn't need you any more."

"That'd be fine, wouldn't it?" Corrigan said. "I'd have a boat, and nothing to haul."

Daggmeyer tapped his arm with the wet chewed stem of his pipe. "Then you ought to be the one to build the mill, hey? So you'd get out of it with a nice profit, and you could still fight your war with Blount over that net profit angle."

Corrigan's brows pulled. "I'm not a contractor. I'm a third-rate steamboat captain. They can build a mill without me."

"Then why haven't they? Because it's too expensive."

"What am I supposed to do? Build one and give it to them?"

Daggmeyer shrugged. "They might build it and then the mines would play out before they got their investment back. Costs money to build a mill and reducer. But if somebody'd show them how they could do it for a hundred thousand, they'd jump at it. And I know how it can be done."

In the quiet, a small door opened and Corrigan began to discern a dark and ugly shape in a hidden room, and an unsavory hand reaching out to beckon him in. He was about to know about Gus Daggmeyer.

"I could do it myself," Daggmeyer said, "but an outsider could do it better. You could come to us and just say that you knew a San Francisco shipper who had had to take a load of mining machinery in on a bad debt. He'd hauled it all the way to Port Isabel and then found the company that ordered it was in bankruptcy. He had no use for it so he sold it to you. You wonder if we'd be interested in having a mill put up."

He glanced abruptly at Corrigan, whose face was unreadable. He seemed reassured.

"The chances are," he went on, "they'd refuse to trust you. But I might suggest to them that we let you build it and then buy it from you for a hundred thousand, if you're fool enough to take such a price. That lets you out of any suspicion of dishonesty, Ira, because you'd planned to operate the mill yourself, and if anything happened to it, it would have been your loss."

"What do you think might happen to it?" Corrigan asked.

Daggmeyer's eyes were bright with humor. "It might wear out prematurely or something."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Corrigan said.

Daggmeyer chuckled. This, and his expression of self-satisfaction, were clues to an inner joy.

"I've already got the machinery," Daggmeyer said. "It's on the wharf at Yuma. I'll cut you in for half, just for handling it the way I tell you."

Corrigan asked, "How did you happen to get the machinery so cheaply you can do this?"

The other's elbow touched his side. "It's—used machinery."

"Used! Worn out, you mean. Rusted to the guts!"

Corrigan was on his feet, shaken with anger and disgust. And shame was there, too, shame that a man like this could

have mistaken him for one of his own breed. He said, "I could go down the street with this and have you ridden out of town on a rail."

Daggmeyer's reaction was a derisive snort, but behind it, deeper than the contempt on his mouth, was amazement. Amazement that he had mistaken his man.

"You could go down the street and get your head bashed in for spreading lies to split up the miners," he retorted. "I've let you in on this because I liked you. I didn't see where you could squawk too much. I knew you'd keep a man drunk till he died screaming in jail, for the work you could wring out of him."

"I keep them out of town all week," Corrigan flared. "If they want to quit, I give them the opportunity."

Daggmeyer laughed. "But you deliver them right at the door of the saloon with the price of a good time, don't you?"

A reply was in Corrigan's mouth, but he gave his head an angry shake and reached down to haul Daggmeyer up by the shirtfront. "I don't defend my methods to you or anybody else."

Daggmeyer's flat face was flushed, but with a trace of satisfaction in it. He said, "They fight the booze all week, while you fight your conscience. Is that it?"

Corrigan's hand twisted Daggmeyer's shirt until the edges of the collar bit the soft brown flesh of his neck. Then abruptly he released him. As Daggmeyer sat down again, he strode into the hot sunlight of the street.

He had three stiff ones at the saloon, but he couldn't silence the whispering in his mind. *He really thought you would do it!*

You knew a man only by his acts. Daggmeyer must have studied him for a year before he decided to let him in on his scheme. He had observed him until he was sure that Ira Corrigan would make a dollar any way he saw a chance. It came down to the proposition that either he

was a poor judge of men, or Corrigan acted the part of a land pirate to perfection.

Corrigan went out and stood in the road in the blinding incandescence of the sun. It was the most therapeutic thing he could have done. *Once, he thought, I loaded wagons in suns like this, for less than enough to eat on. Once I drove twenty mules a hundred miles in such heat. I'd be doing that now, for all anyone else cares. Put any man in this town in my position, and he'd do exactly the things I do.*

He went down the hill with a belligerent thrust to his jaw.

CHAPTER FOUR

In League With the Devil

TWO O'CLOCK Monday was departure time for the *Betsy*. Corrigan glumly saw to the loading of freight. It would be a profitless trip. Hides, a few passengers, some wool. In this mood he looked up to see Shawn and Margaret stepping from the stage onto the deck. Shawn had shaved, cutting himself in the process, and his shirt was cleaner than Corrigan had ever seen it. Margaret wore a crisp linen dress and held her parasol primly over her shoulder. "May we see you in your office, Captain?" she called.

Corrigan took them to the wheelhouse. Shaw sat down with his elbows on his knees, pulling at the fingers of his left hand so that the knuckles cracked. Margaret let Corrigan make some dismal efforts at conversation before she said suddenly, "So it was all a big joke, Captain Corrigan. Something to make the town laugh!"

"No, ma'am," Corrigan told her. "It was as serious a thing as I have ever attempted. If it seems foolish, it is because I was a fool to try it."

She opened her purse and drew out some money. Depositing it on a table, she said, "Mr. Coke, at the woodyard, says this is what you paid for our rent."

Corrigan groaned. He picked up the money and held it toward her. "Margaret—Miss McCormick—please!"

She ignored it. "Where did you ever hit on the clever idea of making a fortune out of such unfortunate men?" she asked with mock politeness.

"Margaret," Corrigan said, "let's not make me look like Simon Legree. I pay the regular day laborer's rate. They're the only men I can get. Give me credit for keeping them out in the open all week."

"Perhaps that is why they have to drink on Sunday." She turned to Shawn. "Come along, Uncle. We want to go up to the mines today to see about work, you know. Mr. Blount promised to help us."

"What do you intend to do?" Corrigan asked her.

"Save money until we have passage to San Francisco. Uncle Shawn can certainly get a position there."

Corrigan hesitated. "I'd—I'd be glad—"

"No, thank you."

Corrigan stood at the window and watched them leave the boat. This, he decided, came of deserting his principles. What happened to the girl and Shawn was their own problem. Yet as he watched her moving across the wharf he knew he had made it his, too. She had caught him at the wrong moment and in the wrong place. She had become important to him.

At last it came to Corrigan that what had happened was that he had come to an inevitable conflict with his own principles. What he had learned in bitter conflict went across the grain of what he had been taught as a boy. Brotherly love, goodness, perseverance—a lot of such antiquated ideals still rattled about his mind. He blamed his parents for giving him a blunderbuss to go out and fight men armed

with cannons. They pounded such notions into you when you were young and those ideas skulked about your mind the rest of your life.

Just before the boat left the wharf that afternoon, Shawn McCormick came hurrying down the hill with a telescope bag in his hand. He came aboard and paid the mate passage to Yuma. Corrigan stopped him on the deck. "What's up, Shawn?"

They had infected Shawn with their stiff-necked prejudice. He gave Corrigan a cold eye. "It's twenty-eight dollars I've paid to be set down in Yuma, not to be questioned by the likes of you."

"Excuse me," Corrigan said.

They made Yuma the next day, where cargo was taken on for the run down-river to Port Isabel, on the Gulf. Shawn left the boat there. Corrigan laid over at Port Isabel, the steaming Mexican port in a miasmic stretch of salt flats, dunes and stinking inlets. In the morning the *Betsy* squared away for the crawl up-river.

At Yuma the next afternoon he found Shawn sprawled among a pile of crates. He had himself a night in the bars of the town, but by the instinct of the accomplishment drunk, he had finished it where the boat could not miss him. While the mate saw to the stowing of freight, Corrigan lugged the Irishman to a cabin. He stood frowning over him as Shawn settled groaningly on the hot mattress, wondering again what kind of business he could have had down here.

Just before they made Owl Spring, Shawn made his appearance. There was a cigar in the corner of his mouth. He stopped to speak to Corrigan, who stood by the rail.

"Have a care with that freight of mine, Captain," he said. "I didn't ship it up here to have your clumsy rousters spill it in the river."

Corrigan glanced forward and saw a

roustabout moving a heavy crate on a hand-car. A small spot of coldness began in his stomach. "What do you mean—your freight?"

Shawn knocked the ash off his cigar. "I'm doing a little contracting."

Corrigan stopped the rouser. He read the lettering on the side of the box.

MR. SHAWN MC CORMICK.
C/O MOJAVE MINING CO.
OWL SPRING, A. T.

He turned, suddenly comprehending. "Shawn!" Shawn had already crossed to the wharf. He turned and waved his cigar as Corrigan called again, but went on to the street.

"Leave it where it sets," Corrigan told the deck man. "Don't touch any of his shipment until I say so." He found the mate and left orders to allow no one aboard. With a sharpness of anxiety in him, he left the boat.

Shawn was already in the Ounce Diggings, buying his first drink in twenty-four hours, when Corrigan entered the saloon. He was surrounded by Tom Hall and a crowd of other independent miners. They were all trying to clap Shawn on the back, and someone sang out:

"That's fine, Shawn, but when am I going to send my first ton of ore down the chute?"

"Don't rush me!" Shawn laughed. "You'll get your mill just as fast as I can get enough men to build it. We've got the first load of machinery and the rest will be along inside of two weeks."

Someone saw Corrigan. Suddenly it was very quiet in the saloon. "I want to talk to you, Shawn," Corrigan said.

"Haven't got time. Busy man."

There was some snickering. "It's to your interest," Corrigan snapped. "I'm not letting those crates go down the stage until we have a talk."

Tom Hall, still wearing the marks of

his battle with Corrigan, shouldered out of the crowd. He wore a gun, now, and he let his hand rest on his cartridge belt. "So it's to be a fight against our building the mill, now, is it? You can't refuse to haul our freight because of the franchise, but you'll fight against unloading it!"

"I'll fight against nothing. I only want to talk to Shawn. Then it will be in his lap."

Hall glanced back at the others. "I reckon Shawn's fight is ours, isn't it, boys? We might as well settle this here and now."

He started toward Corrigan, who did not budge from his place beside the door, but said quietly, "You were the one who fired on me, last time. I held my fire, then. I don't say what I'll do now."

The moment of tension snapped when Shawn stepped from the bar. "Shoot, it won't hurt me none to talk to the man. Meet you at the wharf in fifteen minutes, boys."

MARGARET was sweeping out the dirt-floored shack when they arrived. She gave Corrigan an angry look and then turned to her uncle. "I told you to have nothing to do with this man, Uncle Shawn. Did you get the machinery?"

Shawn nodded. "And now the lad's trying to hold us up for unloading charges or some such folderol."

"I'm trying to save your hide," Corrigan snapped. "They're all your good buddies today, aren't they? Buying you drinks and slapping you on the back. But the minute they break into the first of those crates, they'll be hunting you up to lynch you."

Shawn looked startled. He said, "What's the matter with those crates?"

"It's simply another trick of his," Margaret cut in.

"Was this Daggmeyer's idea, Shawn?" Corrigan demanded.

"Blount's." Shawn colored and stammered, "It's no business of yours whose idea it was."

Corrigan looked earnestly at Margaret. "I've done nothing to deserve your help, Margaret, but I'm asking it. Two people I like very much are in trouble. You are the only ones who can help them."

She was less sure of herself, now. She kept looking at him for a long time before she asked, "Who are they?"

"You know who they are. And the only way they're going to get out of it is for Shawn to give back the money those miners gave him to build the mill. They gave you a hundred thousand, didn't they? And you were to buy the machinery in Yuma and build the mill."

Shawn had lost all interest in his cigar. It dangled limply from his fingers.

"Daggmeyer made me the same proposition," Corrigan told him. "Don't you see, Shawn, they were looking for a sucker! If they could have hung it on me, I'd have been lynched. I was to agree to build a mill and take a hundred thousand dollars from them to do it. But the machinery would have been worthless. Daggmeyer and I were to split the money. Of course, before I ever got the thing built, he'd have set the boys on me and they'd have had my hide—and he'd have had the hundred thousand."

The Irishman looked at his niece, as if for approval to speak.

"That was the way of it, lass," he said finally. "It was you sent me up to him. Blount said he wanted to help us out. He had a load of mill machinery he'd taken in on a bad debt, and if I could get Daggmeyer to talk the independents into backing me for the mill, he'd give me a knock-down price on it. Daggmeyer gave me the hundred thousand after the miners held a meeting."

"What did you pay Blount?" Corrigan asked.

"Fifty thousand. It was to be payment

on delivery. It's still in Daggmeyer's safe."

Corrigan thought a moment. "All right," he said. "We're going over to Daggmeyer's and get the money back. You'll pay the boys off and after that it's Blount's headache."

They went up the street to the assayer's office, but no one was inside. The furnace was cooling and in the front office a breeze stirred papers on Daggmeyer's desk. Through the window Corrigan could see down the street to the wharf. He swore softly, and Shawn looked out to see what had attracted him. At the foot of the street, a mob of miners crowded the boat wharf.

"Saints preserve us! They're going after the crates!"

Corrigan grunted. "I left orders to let no one aboard. If the men stick with me, we can still swing it."

He turned and saw a small wooden safe in the corner. It was an old-fashioned one with a padlock half as big as the safe itself. He groped through the desk for a key and found none. He strode into the work room and returned with a maul. He struck the safe a full-arm swing, but it was like striking a rock. There was an inner lining of metal which would make the breaking of it a matter for a chisel.

But there were no tools in the shop other than a couple of files and several hammers. Corrigan looked out the window again. The shouting of angry voices came up the hill, and at the top of the landing stage he could see the mate standing with his hands on his hips. Hall's crowd was surging against the foot of the plank.

He returned to the furnace room and found a crowbar. Inserting it through the hasp, he attempted to twist it off. The hasp held. Corrigan stopped to mop sweat from his face. "Shawn," he said, "take hold of the other end of this pry bar. We're taking the safe with us."

Shawn hung back. "That's robbery!"

"What do you call selling worthless machinery? You're already in this up to your eyeballs."

They started down the alley toward the waterfront. Corrigan knew something had to be done to get the miners away from the boat. He left Shawn with the safe and found his way to the shack on the Mojave Mining Company wharf. He hesitated over what he knew must be done, because they jailed a man for arson. But when he slipped into the wharfmaster's empty shack, it was to open a drawer in the desk and extract a double-fistful of papers. He spread these under the desk and touched a flame to a crisp sheet of foolscap.

He and Shawn had not long to wait. Someone shouted the warning, and the crowd at the foot of the *Betsy's* landing was siphoned off. Men were suddenly running to the edge of the water with buckets and lugging them back to the shed. Corrigan and Shawn proceeded at a limping gallop to the wharf and onto the boat.

The mate stared at the safe. "Captain," he said suddenly. "I'm out. I'll not be a party to robbery. God knows I've gone almost that far with you time and again, but this is the last."

Corrigan called to him, but he had already gone. He left Shawn in the engine room with a hammer and chisel, and ran up aloft to find another man. He searched the boiler deck, but found no one. They had sneaked away to the last man. And yet a deeper thought told Corrigan they had acted as any men would have; there had been no bond to tie them to him in a fight.

AS A LAST resort, he ascended to the wheelhouse. He stood in the doorway looking at the one who stood at a window, and when she turned he went slowly toward her.

"Margaret! You've got to get off this

tub. They've deserted me, the last man jack of them. And those hot-headed fools on the wharf will be boarding us in five minutes!"

"Then we'll have to explain to them, won't we?"

Corrigan smiled bitterly. "How do you explain to a mob that's after your head with axe-helves and shotguns? We've got Daggmeyer's safe down here, but we haven't been able to open it. We've got to have money to meet those men with when they rush us."

She was looking up at him with sober features, in the quiet sadness of which he saw something he should not have expected to find in her—something not a long way from shame. "Ira," she said, "you're not doing this for yourself, are you? You could unload the crates and be out of it. But you're doing it for us. Why? Isn't that deserting your faith?"

"My faith has deserted me," Corrigan said. "If I'd been decent to those men, they'd have stood with me."

She glanced away. "I don't know whether you've been right or wrong. I know at least that I've been a fool. I've accepted the front people have shown me and not tried to look deeper. I thought Blount was a good man because he said so, and that you were a bad one because you had faults you didn't try to hide. And now I don't know...."

Corrigan felt a warmth in him, and he held her by the shoulders. "The Lord sent you here to teach us both something," he said. "Somewhere in between what you've thought and what I've thought, is the truth. Men want to be righteous and strong, but they aren't, always. They aren't twenty-four carat, Lord help them. But take them by and large, they do the best they can. And the happy man is the one who helps them to be a little better than they are."

She was looking at him with that soft glow in her face; it suddenly struck him

that what he had been preaching was pretty close to religion. He let his hands fall away and said gruffly, "Anyway, that's the way I see it. But if I don't get down there and help Shawn, they'll bury me with those convictions."

In the engine room there was the measured thud of a maul against a chisel. Corrigan ducked into the reek of hot metal and grease and saw Shawn on his knees by the small safe. McCormick looked up and wiped his face. "I'll take a better man than me a month to chisel her open!"

Corrigan took the tools and attacked the safe. The seasoned ash was like iron. He slugged at it for five minutes, and was in the act of swinging another roundhouse blow when someone said:

"Easy there, Corrigan! I paid a good price for that safe!"

Gus Daggmeyer stood with Hugh Blount in the entrance.

Daggmeyer held a big, unwieldy cap-and-ball Colt. Blount's gun was a more modern Frontier model, but either one looked capable of settling an argument. "Safe-cracking! In broad daylight!" the assayer said with grinning relish.

Blount, red-faced and mussed-looking, appeared in more of a hurry than Daggmeyer. He was grim and nervous. "You carried it down here," he said, "and you can carry it back. Now!"

Shawn came to his feet. He looked at the mine boss from under grizzled red browns. "Blount, you bloodsucking son of Satan— He lunged at Blount, but Corrigan caught him by the arm.

"It's a cold deck, Shawn. Let's sit it out."

Daggmeyer watched them slide the crowbar through the hasp of the lock. "Ordinary safe-cracking," he chuckled. "I'm not surprised at Shawn, but I thought you went in for bigger steals, Corrigan."

"I didn't study long enough under the master," Corrigan told him. "What do

you think you're going to do now? How are you going to explain away the hundred thousand in this safe?"

"I'm not going to. There isn't any hundred thousand in the safe. I'll tell the boys so if Shawn claims there is, and by the time they watch me open it, there won't be."

Blount exploded angrily, "He's stalling, Gus! If we don't get this back up the hill before they come, it'll be close work."

"You take things too serious, Hugh. The fire got them aboard, and it'll get us off. But let's start."

And up there, Corrigan knew, the machinery would turn fast: Gus Daggmeyer would stumble upon two men attempting to rifle his safe, and his shots would cut them down almost before he knew who they were. It would be a shock to Owl Spring to discover Shawn McCormick was in it with Corrigan, but what could they believe but their eyes?

Under the prodding of Blount's gun, he raised the crowbar with Shawn. He felt Blount take his revolver. They crowded through the encroaching aisle of machinery onto the deck. As they started toward the plank, Corrigan looked across the wharf and saw the miners beginning to straggle back from the now ruined wharf master's shack. Blount swore. Someone discovered the quartet on the steamboat and raised a shout.

Daggmeyer said quickly, "Set it down, boys. We'll settle it right here."

Corrigan straightened, knowing that for the time being the others must carry the act. Tom Hall was among the first on the wharf, and he stopped at the foot of the stage to listen to Daggmeyer.

"I guess this is the end of our mill, boys, and we're lucky to have our money. It's Shawn and Corrigan. I was keeping the money in my safe for Shawn. Danged if they didn't try to steal it; and on top of that the machinery appears to be worthless! It was a swindle, you see. We're

very lucky to have our money out of it."

EVEN Hall looked a little sand-bagged, as though he had thought of Corrigan as a hard man but not a dishonest one.

Hall started up the landing stage. Then someone walked from a companionway to the head of the stage. Margaret stood there in the middle of it.

"Mr. Daggmeyer's lying," she said. "He tried to get Captain Corrigan to help him swindle you, and when he wouldn't, he and Blount tricked my uncle into it. The money wouldn't be in his safe if Uncle Shawn had been trying to cheat you, would it? And how do they know the machinery is no good? The crates are still nailed down!"

She was saying what no one else could say and be listened to.

"You see, Blount told Uncle Shawn he had all this new machinery on the dock at Yuma that he'd taken it on a bad debt. He said he couldn't build the mill himself because of his contract with Corrigan. Shawn hasn't had a dollar out of it. And Captain Corrigan has risked his life to save us from disgrace and to get your money back for you."

Daggmeyer suddenly shouted: "Why, you lying little—" He seized her roughly by the arm.

Corrigan pivoted and reached for Blount's gun. He got it by the barrel; the searing flash of the shot burned his wrist as Blount fired. He felt the ball rip through his shirtsleeve, and twisted the barrel down and around until it left Blount's grasp. He raised it and chopped at the mine boss' head. Blount staggered, fell down.

When he turned to confront Daggmeyer, the assayer had an arm about Margaret's waist and was holding her against him. Daggmeyer fired once, the bullet striking the outside of the boatman's thigh and half-turning him. Corrigan

rushed at him, but at that instant Shawn McCormick hit the man at the knees in a dive. Both went down, but Daggmeyer rolled clear and came to his knees.

Corrigan fired one shot that threw his arm high on the recoil.

Now Daggmeyer was out of it. He had taken the shot in the breast.

THERE was a solemn ceremonial aboard the *Betsy* an hour later. It consisted of Shaw's returning to Tom Hall the money he had received from the miners. Corrigan, having had the mate's rough first-aid on his slashed thigh, stood by as the deal was closed. He stood by the rail as Hall turned to go back.

"I'm willing to say I'm wrong, Corrigan. Are you?"

"I only start there," said Corrigan. "There will be an advance in wages aboard this tub, and—certain other changes. We'll see what can be done about lowering freight rates."

Hall said, "That's good enough for me." They shook hands.

There was a quiet celebration in the wheelhouse of the *Betsy*. Corrigan had a bottle of good Spanish wine in his cabin. He brought it up, but on the point of pouring a half-tumblerful for himself and Margaret, he paused to ask, "Do you reckon a few drops would—"

"I think it might be good for both of us," she laughed.

They drank.

Corrigan went up and took Margaret's hands.

"It won't be forever we'll stay here, Margaret," he said. "This is a god-forsaken desert and not one for a woman. Another year and I'll be able to buy a ferryboat in San Francisco. Will you come with me, Margaret? It's a queen you'll be—"

It went on for some time, without her saying anything, but finally, womanlike, she had the last word, and it was yes.

TALES of the

by LEE

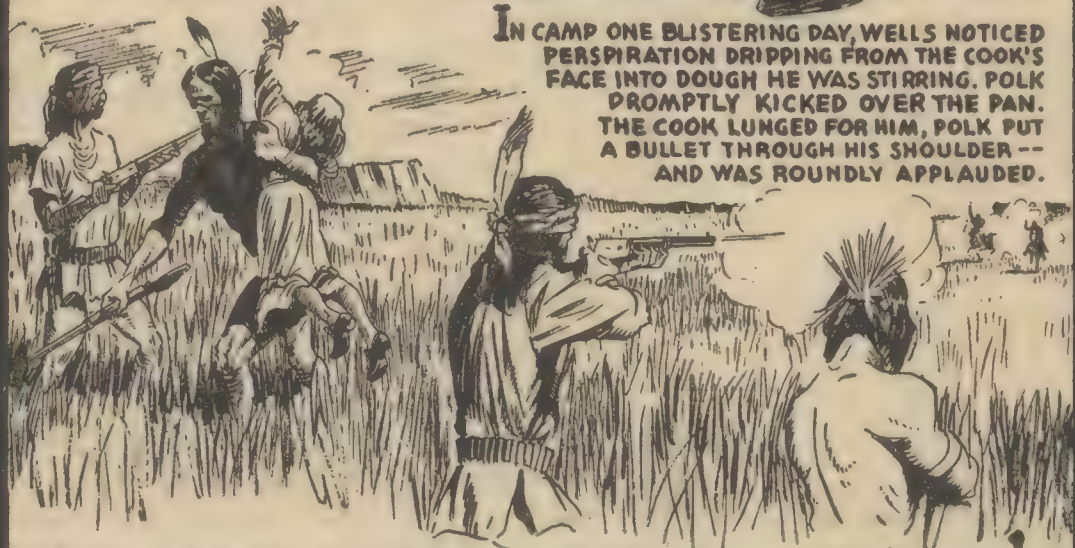
Badman from Missouri

POLK WELLS, ACCORDING TO HIS OWN TELLING, WAS ONE OF THE GREATEST BADMEN OF THE OLD WEST. THEY SAY HE HAD OVER 30 NOTCHES ON HIS GUN, THOUGH HE ONLY ADMITTED 2.

BORN IN RUSHVILLE, MO., TWO YEARS BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR, HE GREW FROM A TOUGH KID THROWING ROCKS INTO A TOUGHER LAD THROWING LEAD. IN HIS EARLY TEENS HE PEPPERED A FRIEND WITH BUCKSHOT FOLLOWING AN ARGUMENT, THEN RIGGED HIMSELF OUT IN FRINGED BUCKSKIN COAT AND BRITCHES, BUCKLED ON A PAIR OF SIX-GUNS AND BECAME A TEAMSTER WITH AN OX TRAIN HEADED FOR FORT LARAMIE.



IN CAMP ONE BLISTERING DAY, WELLS NOTICED PERSPIRATION DRIPPING FROM THE COOK'S FACE INTO DOUGH HE WAS STIRRING. POLK PROMPTLY KICKED OVER THE PAN. THE COOK LUNGED FOR HIM, POLK PUT A BULLET THROUGH HIS SHOULDER -- AND WAS ROUNDLY APPLAUDED.

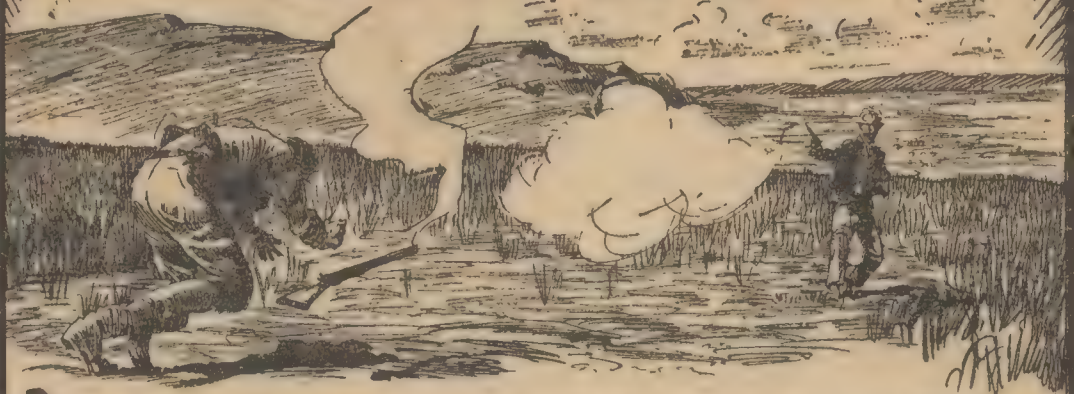


HE MADE SEVERAL TRIPS, ACTING AS SCOUT AND HUNTER. INDIANS STAGED A SURPRISE RAID ON ONE OX TRAIN AND GRABBED A YOUNG GIRL. THEY WERE DRAGGING HER AWAY WHEN WELLS AND ANOTHER SCOUT RODE OUT PELLMELL, SEIZED HER AND MADE IT BACK TO CAMP. POLK'S COMPANION DIED OF HIS WOUNDS.

AT ATCHISON, KAN., HE DREW A \$1 FINE FOR TRAIN ROBBERY--THOUGH HE CLAIMED HE'D MERELY GOTTEN INTO AN ARGUMENT WITH THE AGENT, PULLED HIS GUN TAKEN THE PACKAGE ADDRESSED TO HIM, AND LEFT FULL PAYMENT.



— OLD WEST —



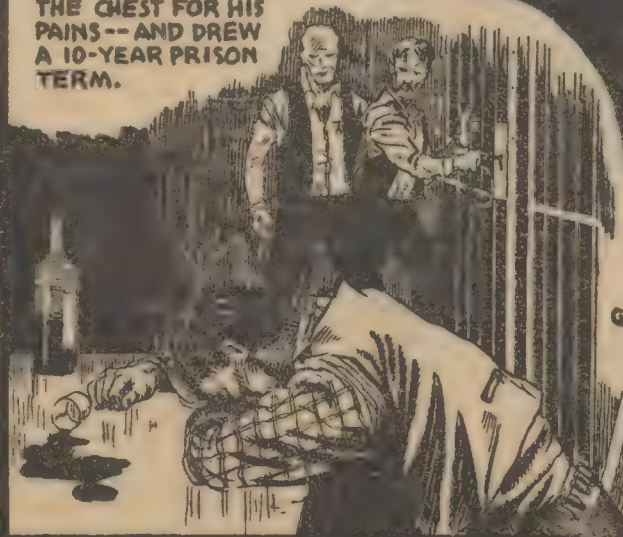
POLK MARRIED AND OPENED A GROCERY STORE IN MISSOURI. BUT THAT FAILED IN '77 AND HE STOLE A HORSE AND HEADED FOR SALT LAKE CITY. THERE AN ARGUMENT WITH AN UNCLE, LEONARD SMITH, WOUND UP IN A CHALLENGE TO A DUEL. SMITH'S SHOTGUN SPRAYED POLK WITH BUCKSHOT, BUT POLK'S COLT FINISHED SMITH WITH ONE SLUG. JAILED, WELLS AND 3 OTHERS ESCAPED. ONE WAS KILLED IN A FIGHT WITH A POSSE AND POLK READ LATER, TO HIS AMAZEMENT, THAT HE HIMSELF HAD BEEN HANGED.

HIS WIFE READ ABOUT IT TOO, AND POLK CAME HOME TO FIND HER MARRIED AGAIN. SO HE THREW IN WITH A GANG ROBBING BANKS, FARMHOUSES AND TRAVELERS. SOON MOTHERS WERE USING THE NAME "POLK WELLS" TO FRIGHTEN THEIR CHILDREN INTO OBEDIENCE.

IN '81, POLK AND ANOTHER BANDIT HELD UP A RIVERTON, IA, BANK AND DISAPPEARED WITH \$4,000. TWO SHERIFFS FOUND HIM RUNNING A HOTEL IN WISCONSIN. THOUGH THEY HAD THE DROP ON HIM, HE WENT FOR HIS GUN. HE GOT A BULLET IN THE CHEST FOR HIS PAINS--AND DREW A 10-YEAR PRISON TERM.



THE FOLLOWING YEAR, WELLS AND OTHER PRISONERS SLIPPED CHLOROFORM INTO A GUARD'S WINE AND ESCAPED. THE GUARD NEVER CAME TO AND WHEN POLK WAS CAPTURED SKULKING IN THE WOODS, HE WAS FINALLY CONVICTED OF MURDER. THE BADMAN DIED IN AN IOWA PRISON IN 1896, STILL SERVING HIS LIFE SENTENCE.



THIS KILL IS MINE

By GAROLD HARTSOCK

"All I want, gents," the kid said, "is the same kind of break you gave my old man—your guns where I can see 'em, your bullets where I can breast 'em—an' one last laugh . . . on the other side of hell!"

THE FINAL few blocks were the longest distance of his journey. Til Corbin held his sorrel to a walk up the still, shade-dappled street that was Jacksonville during its *siesta*. He paid no attention when men tipped down in their chairs along the walk, staring. Soon the entire settlement would know that a Corbin was back in town.

He drew in the sorrel before the dark alley of Ludlow's Barn and he swung down, a tall, young man, dark eyes bleak. He wasted a moment looking about, feeling the town's strangeness after so long a time. The dank stable odors alone seemed unchanged. Ludlow came from his office, peering from beneath shaggy brows.

"By Lord, it's Til Corbin!" The stableman made no offer of his hand, nor did Corbin expect it; this town would have little friendship for Red Corbin's son, and he had little to return. As soon as his purpose was fulfilled he would ride again and close the book.

"Stable the horse, feed and curry. Treat him right."

Ludlow cleared his throat and looked at the ground. "Dollar a day."

Corbin kept his temper unruffled. He understood—cash in advance for one of the wild breed. He dropped two silver dollars in Ludlow's stained hand. "I'll be gone by tomorrow night."

He unstrapped the canvas sack from behind his saddle, slung it over his shoulder and, carrying his rifle, started back down the street, turning his glance here and there. He had grown up in this town, yet each building, each tree, each board in the walk held a strangeness that left him feeling lost and grave.

Across the way John Mayville's bank presented its important facade, and he saw that someone was watching him from behind washed panes. He recognized Mayville's face and was shocked. Mayville looked older, older than three added years should make him. He saw the familiar, well-clothed body that was always too immaculate. *An honest man, he thought, should not be above touching the soil.*

A small loitering boy inspected him with the intentness of youth. Corbin said, "Hello, son," and an idea came. He stopped on the walk. "Son, you ever hear of two men called Dolbee and Bly?"

"Sure," the boy said instantly, "they're the gents what killed Red Corbin."

Corbin held out a half-dollar which the boy snatched. "You know where I could find those two?"

"They work for Mr. Mayville on his ranch. They can shoot. They're real tough. They killed Red Corbin easy as fallin' off a log."



He whirled, back against the tree, and fired. . . .

"Thanks, son." He went on down the walk, his bootheels jarring the boards. *Mayville*, he thought bleakly.

He turned into the U. S. Hotel. A girl on the point of leaving the lobby saw his saddle sack and stepped behind the desk.

He said, "I'd like a room, miss."

"I'm not the clerk, but I can register you." She watched him with unnatural closeness. She said, "The prodigal returns."

He saw that he should know her. She was tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed and smiling at him. "Glory—not Glory Becker?"

"Is that so strange, Corbin?"

He stared openly now. "Little Glory Becker!" He shook his head in disbelief, glanced about the lobby and back at her.

"I work here. I'm a waitress." She inspected his growing frown. "It's honest labor, Corbin."

"Still sassy, too," he said, grinning. "I meant—"

"Sign the register. I'll show you to your room."

He signed, dug into his pocket for money.

Glory said, "You've luggage, Corbin," and came around the desk.

A strange pleasure warmed him. "You'd trust a Corbin? You're young and tender."

"I'm eighteen."

He was still astonished; his eyes insisted on their inspection of her.

"And full grown," she said.

"I see that."

He followed her up the stairs. Her dress was long; the white apron and cuffs gave her demureness that didn't at all match the spirited manner. In the upper hall she said, "Now, I'll satisfy your curiosity. I thought it was time to earn my living."

"Your pa—"

"Father didn't try to stop me. I think he even approved." She showed him that mischievous glance. "But you should have heard Marie! A waitress for a sister!"

For him all the lightness disappeared from this moment. "Marie—"

"Did you come back for Marie, or to kill Dolbee and Bly?"

HER directness was a part of her, he remembered now, and it caught him unprepared.

"Romance or revenge?" Glory persisted.

"Where's that room, little one? There's trail dust on me."

Her dark hair was done high; had it hung long the way he remembered, it would have danced with the toss of her head. She led him to a room down the hall. She watched him open the door and enter; the deep blue eyes showed sparks of temper. "You haven't answered a thing, Corbin."

He placed sack and rifle in the corner, poured water from a pitcher into a basin on the stand. "You always were a curious little girl," he said. "I recall—"

"I was not a little girl, Corbin! I was fifteen when you left here. Some girls are married by then!" She whirled away down the hall.

He closed the door gently, pulled his shirt and washed in the basin, and shaved his red stubble. Flaming hair, black eyes were the mark of a Corbin. *Mayville*, he thought. *Where does Mayville fit into this?* He put on a gray flannel shirt that was wrinkled but clean. He felt better. He locked the door and went down the stairs. Glory Becker was nowhere in sight.

A man rose from a rocker by the window, a short, broad man, sweat-stained hat pushed back on his bald pate. "Hello, Til."

"Sheriff Kane."

"I wanted to see you, Til." Sheriff Kane held the door. "Let's go outside."

"News travels fast," said Corbin, "in this town."

"Son, I been expectin' you for three weeks, ever since your pa—died."

"Since Dolbee and Bly killed him?"

"Now, Til—" the lawman spread his thick hands—"you can't do no good here. Why don't you ride out of this town and forget you ever saw it?"

"I'll be gone by tomorrow night."

Sheriff Kane swore. "Try talkin' to a Corbin! You came for revenge and now there's hell to pay. I've got to stop you, you know that."

"Did you try to stop Dolbee and Bly?"

Sheriff Kane sighed. "You want the story?"

Corbin glanced up the street. From the bank window John Mayville was watching. The town was not as quiet as it had been; others stood in their doorways to see what would happen with Red Corbin's son come back for his revenge.

The free gold was long gone from this area and now the town had settled under John Mayville's guidance to a tight-lipped respectability, leaning backward in an attempt to outlive its roaring past—an old hellion sinking into strict middle age. The badmen were gone with the gold. The lusty, laughing wild ones were gone, too—gone forever when they killed Red Corbin.

"I want the story, Sheriff."

He walked beside the lawman, down the main street, then left to the red brick courthouse. Sheriff Kane wiped his bald head and set back the hat. "He was in jail, Red was. Someone passed him a gun and he escaped at suppertime. Dolbee and Bly saw him. They did what they had to do to stop your pa."

"Hell," Corbin said, "in the Wallowa, clear across the state, I heard that much."

Sheriff Kane kicked at the earth, sighed, and finally met Corbin's unwavering stare. "Come in. I knew you'd have to have it all."

Corbin followed him into a cluttered office. Sheriff Kane waited till Corbin was seated. "Old man Johnson out on the Applegate was shot and killed, his shack burned—"

Corbin slammed his fist on the desk. "Say it plain!"

"Some riders caught Red Corbin in the act. They brought him in. He was waitin' trial when he escaped."

The room was quiet until Corbin scraped back his chair. He stood tall before the sheriff. "My father and I rode separate trails long ago. But he'd have set things straight for me and I aim to do the

same for him. Sheriff, something smells wrong. Red Corbin would ride his horse into saloons and down the sidewalk. Maybe he'd have robbed John Mayville's too-respectable bank. But he wouldn't have killed an old, defenseless man."

The sheriff finally raised his glance. He said quietly, "No need to get het up, boy. I've thought the same thing many times. I liked Red Corbin."

"Go on."

"What's more—"

"The riders who brought in Red Corbin. Who were they?"

The lawman let his breath go in a deep sigh. He said wearily, "Hell. I kept hopin' you wouldn't ask and I knew you would. Any man on the street could tell you. John Mayville brought him in."

"And," Corbin said gently, "Dolbee and Bly."

The sheriff nodded.

MAYVILLE'S bank was still open. Corbin waited while the banker pretended to finish some paper work. Presently Mayville turned and came to the wicket; Corbin saw his hands become unsteady.

Mayville's face was still smooth, but an oldness seemed to tug at the corners of his eyes and his mouth. This impression of age Corbin had noted earlier. Mayville tried for an easy meeting. "Well, Corbin, time's not harmed you."

"I've no heavy secrets," Corbin said.

The banker took a backward step. "Now, I want no trouble with you—"

"I came to ask you a question," Corbin said. "You feel the pulse of this country. Why would my father want to kill old man Johnson?"

Mayville's eyes were pale, blending with the paleness of skin and hair; when he put his bland, banker's look in those eyes there was no reading him.

"I'm sorry, Corbin, I wouldn't care to speculate on the matter."

"But you know what happens here—it's your country, your town. Did Johnson have money cached, had he found gold on his land?"

Mayville spread his hands. He smiled. "Sorry, Corbin."

Corbin said, "You could've saved me time. Now I'll have to do it the hard way. Somewhere there's an answer." His hand was on the doorlatch when Mayville said, "I could tell you this without violating trust—under the circumstances—"

Corbin paced back to the wicket, and waited. Mayville's brows were drawn in thought as he stared at his money counter. "Your father was dickering for Johnson's place. Did something go wrong? A disagreement?" Mayville shook his head, still thoughtfull. "Who can say—now?"

Corbin left the bank. A group of men were gathered nearby, and their attention had been on John Mayville's bank. A young man of some size seemed to be the leading figure. This youth said in a purposely loud voice, "Hell, he don't look so tough."

Corbin saw faces he had known back across the years; he saw no friend. He passed the big young man with a brief glance.

The same loud voice carried to his ears: "If this town calls that the wild breed, I'm sayin' this town's blind an' rusty in the joints."

Corbin turned abruptly and strode back to the big young man. "You're right about one thing," he said. "The town's rusty." He slapped with the back of his hand; he struck two short, hard blows that sent the younger man sprawling. He waited a moment, then rubbed his knuckles and continued on his way. The big young man was noticeably quiet as he got up from the dirt.

Glory Becker had been watching from the hotel. She said, "You'll have the whole Dolbee family in your hair."

Corbin looked sharply at her.

"That was young Dolbee. His father was the one—the one—"

"Who helped kill Red Corbin?"

"Yes."

Corbin stood quietly, staring out at the town. He was alone; he felt the gates closed against him because of his name. But he hadn't ridden across a state expecting welcome. He meant to see the matter finished.

Glory stood beside him, tall, well-formed, prettier by far than he remembered. Some thought seemed to be pressing her, and presently she said, "You haven't seen Marie?"

"Should I, little one?"

"You're going to. You know you wouldn't come back to this town and not see her. Maybe she's the real reason you came back."

He smiled at her woman's persistence, but gravity settled on him again; the thought of Marie always took his laughter away. He said, honestly, "I'm afraid to see her."

Glory's lips were scornful. "Last of the wild breed, soft over a woman. Don't go to pieces. Three years are a long time." She left him standing there.

He went to his room and rested, but he could not long be still. With a woman's driving accuracy Glory had touched him where he had thought he was hardened.

HE WENT downstairs and out the door and down the street. Evening's cool shadows were slanting over the town and they were like the shadows in his mind. Because he was honest with himself he looked into those shadows—he had come to this town with a purpose and he had to run the course. Seeing Marie might affect his will. Marie, the soft one, who didn't believe in violence. . . .

He passed through the low iron gate and followed the curving walk up to her father's big house. His knock was solid on

the oaken door. He heard her steps; the door opened.

She was smiling, beautiful as always. She said, chiding him gently, "I thought I'd have to find you, Til."

He removed his hat and followed her inside, feeling his awkwardness, feeling exactly as he always felt in this house, misplaced.

"Marie—you haven't changed."

She was small, slender and golden. He knew everything about her. She smiled at him. "Should I have changed?"

"Everything, everyone else has. I thought you'd forgotten me in all this time."

"There was too much to forget."

Excitement rose in his body. He said, "Up there in the Wallowa, I worked eighteen hours a day. I've built a fine little ranch. I don't have to be ashamed of being a Corbin."

"Now you're going to undo all that."

He looked sharply at her.

"Til," she said, "I know why you came back. You're going to put yourself down to that old level again."

Alarm spread through him, and fear. He said, "My father didn't get a fair deal. I aim to find out why."

"Til—" She came to him. "All I wanted was to remember—"

With her hand small and appealing on his arm, the fire came back. He held her by the shoulders and he looked at her.

"Marie—" As he bent to her it seemed that she turned her face; he kissed only her cheek. She whirled gaily from his arms, lightly laughing. "Til—you're looking so fine—"

He held quiet, thinking, *It's natural for her to be nervous after so long a time.*

He said again, to hear his conviction, "You haven't changed, Marie. And when my job is done—maybe—"

She stood at a round mahogany table, her small, lovely hands restless with a book. "Til—"

He looked at her. The slenderness, the roundness of her body was the same; her hair was shining and golden, the way he remembered. Her face . . . the difference was in her face, in the eyes that fluttered away from his and remained downcast.

"I wrote at first," he said. "You didn't answer."

"Til, it was so long, so terribly long—"

Anticipation made his voice cold. "If something bothers you, say it plain."

"Til, I couldn't. I'm engaged to John Mayville." And then she rushed to him, closely, and words tumbled in their haste to be said: "It needn't make any difference between us—if you'd forget this revenge—"

He let his glance stay a spell on her near, uplifted face. When he turned and went out through the hall his boots made the only sound in the house. He closed the door behind him.

GLANCES followed him and voices turned to guarded murmurs as he passed through the hotel lobby into the dining room. He was late. The diners were gone and Glory Becker came instantly to his table.

"Hail the conquering hero," she said.

He ignored her.

"I tried to tell you, Corbin."

He said, "I'll have ham and eggs." He glanced up, and in her deep blue eyes was not the riding look she usually showed him. "I'm sorry, Corbin. Truly."

"Let's hold hands and cry together."

She whirled away to the kitchen.

"Make that a double order," he called.

When she returned with the platters she was the Glory he expected. "There's nothing wrong with your appetite, Corbin. You'll live."

"I'll live."

"Now you've one thing to keep you in this town. Your romance is gone. But Dolbee and Bly rode in ten minutes ago."

He gave her instant attention. "You

think that John Mayville sent for them?"

"I'm paid to wait on tables, not to think."

He studied her. She was taller than Marie, slender but strong, and her eyes that tolerated a man's looking her over were now watchful. She colored under his inspection.

He said, "You're a hard little girl. Years ago you used to fight the boys."

"I'm still fighting the boys."

"You used to sit on the stairs and peek into the parlor. I wonder if you're a nice girl."

"What do you care?"

"Did you watch when John Mayville came to call on Marie?" She wouldn't answer. "Why did you leave home, Glory?" he persisted.

She nearly quit his table; then her voice lashed out, but the bitterness was not for him. "I couldn't stand it, Corbin! I couldn't! The way she went after him, using her tricks. Oh, don't you see? She'd never have married you, ever. You were fascinating, you charmed her with your pursuit, but—"

"I'm a Corbin."

"You're one of the wild breed. Marie wants security and respect. John Mayville can give her those things."

He repeated his question, then: "Do you think Mayville sent for Dolbee and Bly?"

"Of course he did. John Mayville wouldn't face you alone with a gun."

He reached out and seized her wrist. "Now I'm hearing what I want to hear. Why would Mayville need to face me with a gun? Why?"

She looked down at the wrist he was hurting. "Let me go! Damn you, Corbin, let me go—"

"What did you hear on the stairs? Or what did you guess?"

She tore at his fingers; he let her go and she ran toward the kitchen.

He finished his meal in solitude. He

was ready to leave when he heard her quick steps. She wouldn't meet his gaze.

"You've a right to know," she said, "it may be important. I did listen on the stairs. You know John Mayville is building an empire in Paradise Valley off the Applegate."

"He owns a pile of land, I know that."

"One night Mayville promised Marie that empire. He said, 'We'll own the country for miles. There's one more ranch I want—the Johnson place. I'm going to add it on before long.' The dining room was silent for a full, dragging moment. Glory said, 'Now he's added it.'"

Corbin nodded wearily. "It could be something—it could be everything. Power is a fine thing if it doesn't get out of hand."

AT THAT moment Sheriff Kane stepped into the dining room, glanced about, and came on heavy feet to Corbin's table.

"Til, I'm asking you to cause no trouble. I don't want to strap on my gun against you."

Corbin tilted back in his chair. The nerves started tingling in his body. He grinned, and knew it was Red Corbin's grin. "Who sent you, Sheriff?"

"Damn it, boy, you're puttin' the town on edge."

"I've done nothing but ask questions. That illegal?"

"Then I'll ask you as a friend—will you leave Mayville be? Give me your word and I'll give you my hand."

Corbin rose and yawned. "Sheriff, I had a much more interesting offer earlier this evening."

He went out of the dining room, leaving Glory Becker and the sheriff staring after him.

He had finished cleaning the carbine in his lamp-lit room when he heard a knock, then Sheriff Kane's voice.

Corbin called, "Come in."

Sheriff Kane entered and closed the door and stood on restless feet, plainly bearing a weight in his mind. The sheriff said, "It's a job, and you do it the best you can."

Corbin said, "Sure."

"I'm not Mayville's man," the sheriff said. "Mayville doesn't order me."

Corbin stayed silent, tinkering with his rifle.

"What I do is what I have to do," said the sheriff.

That tone caused Corbin to raise a quick glance; he looked directly into Sheriff Kane's revolver. Sweat stood on the lawman's face, but his gunhand was rock-steady.

Corbin jeered quietly, "You're not Mayville's man?"

"Get your warbag. I'll take the rifle."

Corbin sat unmoving. "Sheriff," he said, "I could almost beat you. This rifle is loaded."

"I guessed that, boy."

The seconds that dragged out were the longest of Corbin's life. Some inner beligerence told him to move now, and have it started, or over, but across the years he had learned of patience and waiting. Now was not the time. Carefully he laid the carbine on the bed. He rose and picked up his saddle sack. "Lead on, Sheriff."

He started for the stairs but the sheriff said gently, "Another way down," and motioned him to an open rear window. "Private."

At the foot of a ladder Corbin found his sorrel, saddled, ready to ride. Another horse was tethered nearby. Corbin smiled. "Sheriff," he said, "you're a confident man."

The sheriff mounted, still alert, still watching Corbin. "No, Til," he said as they rode into the night, "not confident at all. I'm sworn to my duty. I'm doing it the only way I know."

"Dolbee and Bly are back there, waiting for me?" Corbin asked.

"They're there."

"And Mayville's there and Red Corbin's dead. And the town is ready to let it go at that."

Sheriff Kane said simply, "What could anyone do?"

"Red Corbin was killed by the same men who brought him in and no questions asked! Where we headed?"

"To the county line. When I leave you there I'll have to warn you, don't come back."

"How many votes Mayville buy you last election, Sheriff?"

They rode, then, in silence along the valley's edge toward the river. They were passing a deep oak grove when Corbin launched himself from the stirrups. He threw arms about the lawman and jerked him to the earth; they landed hard and Corbin slammed the sheriff along the neck with his fist, then grabbed the holstered revolver.

"Now, Sheriff. Now. You didn't think I was leaving this job undone?"

Sheriff Kane got to his feet. His head lowered. "Boy, I'm comin' in for that gun. You won't shoot—" Corbin clicked back the hammer. The sheriff stopped abruptly.

Corbin retrieved his rifle. "Catch your horse."

There was enough light to see the sheriff's face after he was lashed to an oak. Corbin said, "You're like the town—old, hidebound. You're afraid to risk anything for anyone but Mayville."

The sheriff didn't answer.

Corbin said, "Tomorrow I'll be back, and you can't prove a thing. I'll claim we were out of the county, beyond your authority. If I don't come back—start worrying."

He rode back through the night, faster than he had come. He had gained his room when he heard a sound along the corridor and whirled, dropping his saddle sack, bringing up the rifle.

Glory Becker said, "Til—"

"Glory," Corbin said, "don't do that."

She followed him into his room. "You were gone," she said. "And I heard them up here, snooping—"

"Dolbee and Bly."

"I don't know. I think so."

"Well, then—" he said. He gripped the carbine and stepped into the hall. "Get to your own room, in case they come back."

"You're going out to find them?"

"It was a long ride from the Wallowa," said Corbin, "just for talk."

HE FOUND them. And he knew Dolbee and Bly out of all those in the murky saloon; Dolbee big and open-countenanced, a smiling man; Bly small and quiet at the big man's side, no good without a leader.

Corbin carried the rifle, hammer eased, in the crook of his arm—he could beat most men who used a revolver and he was anxious to try. He pushed into the saloon and men saw him and rose and got away.

He called, "Dolbee—you're looking for me."

The two were caught, guard down. He stopped within reach of them. Dolbee was not outwardly disturbed.

Dolbee said, "We wanted to get this straightened out, Corbin. Some say you came back to take up for your father. Hell, that's natural. But look at it this way—it was a duty no man would want. You can't hold it against us, fellow."

Corbin saw men listening and knew, then, that they had asked questions in this town—logic was logic, and neither respect for Mayville nor fear of him could stop men from thinking.

Dolbee was a talker, a smiling man who could smooth his way with words or take the drop and kill with no compunction; Corbin knew the kind.

Dolbee said, "Your father was in on a murder charge and we had to stop him."

Corbin was actually enjoying himself. He said, "Regards from Red Corbin," and jerked the rifle up and around, hard against Dolbee's head. The man dropped without a sound.

Corbin said to the staring, pale-faced Bly, "Do something. Go for that gun. I want to see how you'd have stacked up against Red Corbin, fair, in the open."

Bly kept his hands chest high; Corbin aimed at the little man's belly, and backed slowly from the saloon. No one followed.

He was turning his key in its latch when Glory Becker opened her door and looked out. "Did you—"

Corbin said, "There you are, curious as a cat. Go to bed."

She slammed the door.

It was late when he rose. Glory Becker pounced upon him in the lobby. Her eyes were wide and horrified on the rifle, but fascinated.

"Til—you aren't—"

"Mayville in his bank yet?"

"Of course, it's after ten. You slept like it was a picnic you're going to. Go along, get killed, what do I care!"

The moment he stepped into the street, things happened: up across the street in the next block, the bank door slammed shut, someone yelled a warning and the crowd disappeared into stores and shops like gophers hitting holes. Dolbee and Bly, waiting up by Ludlow's barn, were the only ones left.

Now was the time for doing, and a long wait he'd had. Corbin commenced his cautious walk up the street. Dolbee and Bly, men who used six-shooters, should be hastening to meet him to lessen the advantage of his rifle at a distance. But their tread was slow. They hadn't separated. Maybe they were trying to bluff him. He laughed.

After last night the burden was on them, and he intended it to be that way. Dolbee was a man with pride, Bly had venom. He wasn't sure what Mayville

had. He watched closely for their first action, so he'd be inside the law.

A warning, strangely felt, stilled his step. Dolbee and Bly were acting mighty odd; they were easy targets together. He'd half expected Mayville to keep under cover. It was the way they'd operate—ace up the sleeve.

He hesitated before stepping into the cross street, and he heard a woman's scream.

"Til—up there—the roof!"

And he saw the ace up their sleeve, a shadow cast down from the roof behind him by the climbing sun, a brief, over-anxious shadow that darted back.

Corbin made a fast decision. He sprinted over the cross street into the protection of a building's face. The bullets that slammed after him were hot and furious failures.

"Young Dolbee!" Corbin grunted, and felt a cold sweat. He'd forgotten young Dolbee.

He had his excuse. He dropped to one knee and saw Dolbee and Bly cleave apart and leap for cover. Corbin let out one wild yell and, instead of wasting the bullet, turned it full into Mayville's big bank window. He fired another shot just to hear the beautiful sound of ruined glass.

A good-sized tree grew at the walk's edge, and this was his nearest refuge. But in that instant of jumping for that cover Corbin knew he was visible from the roof. He whirled, back against the tree, and fired at the precise instant that young Dolbee drew down on him. He saw young Dolbee flung around by the tearing impact. He turned his back upon the roof. He slipped the magazine and pressed in three shells to have it full, then dropped to one knee with the tree now protecting him in front.

Dolbee and Bly were not far apart, and that was good; their shots came from the same angle. But apparently they saw that disadvantage now that their ace was gone.

There came two blasts, building-echoed, and Corbin saw a hunched, darting figure too swift to tag. He held his fire. Now Dolbee was up across the street, protected by a row of barrels before the Good Luck Bar; Bly held a fort similar to his own, a gnarled tree left at the sidewalk's edge.

Passing lead whined close by. Corbin jumped erect. Dolbee had too much vision. Stiffly straight, Corbin searched for sanctuary and saw it twenty feet up the street—the familiar cut-in doorway of Renfrow's Mercantile.

Bark flew against his face. They had his range now. Now if Mayville over in his bank entered the fight. . . .

BUT DOLBEE was not satisfied. Stiff and peering, Corbin saw the foremost barrel tip over and commence a gentle roll down the sidewalk. He understood that strategy. Behind the barrel was a man moving down to shelter by Mayville's bank, thus to lay bare Corbin's position.

Up the street, Bly behind his tree would be waiting for Corbin to dodge for Renfrow's doorway. Corbin stood still and sweated. And finally one thought came through, clear and reasonable—a man crawling behind that barrel was in no position to shoot.

Corbin waited till the rolling barrel was a scant rod from Mayville's building. He put a bullet into that barrel—and another—levering fast. This sudden pressure so close to safety was too much. Dolbee squirmed into view and, lunged for the bank corner. Corbin killed Dolbee with his next shot.

Now the odds were evening, and in a surge of exultation, Corbin heard the beat of feet on the walk. Bly. No good without a leader, Bly was running.

Corbin stepped swiftly to unobstructed view—and almost died. Bly was running back to Ludlow's barn, but running sideways, arm extended back; the reports of

his gun filled the street, and lead tore off Corbin's hat and broke a nearby window.

Corbin dived to the walk, rifle ahead. Bly stopped and drew down for one final shot, and that was when Corbin pulled trigger. It was the last shot necessary. A long, waiting minute he lay ready on the rough hot boards, staring at Bly up there in the dust, then across at Dolbee, very still, very dead.

He stood up slowly.

"Mayville!"

The banker's muffled cry came instantly. "Don't shoot, Corbin! I've no gun. It'll be murder!"

Corbin made his call clear and penetrating. "Bly and Dolbee are dead. There's one thing I want from you. Come out."

Silence spread wide through the morning air. Half the town had heard his call.

John Mayville's shaky answer came at last. "I don't trust you, Corbin."

"Come out or I'll be in for you."

The dead quiet dragged out again, and then in his doorway John Mayville slowly appeared; no man ever contained less courage. Others now came into view.

Corbin held the gun half lifted in front of him. "I want this from you—I want the real reason why Dolbee and Bly killed Red Corbin."

Mayville's hand came out; he backed a step and looked about wildly for a friendly face.

Corbin levered the carbine.

"Don't shoot!" Mayville screamed. "I'll tell you—he hated me. I was afraid of Red Corbin."

"Why?"

John Mayville's breath came audibly in the stillness. He kept his eyes on Corbin's gun. "Red knew. He knew—" And then Mayville collapsed to his knees.

Corbin waited, certain there'd be no more. "Maybe," he said clearly, "it was because Red Corbin caught you three burning out old Johnson, killing him?"

The banker was near to fainting; he expected to die—the fear of it was stamped on his face—but some remnant of pride had sealed his lips.

Corbin raised his voice. "I'm not going to kill you, Mayville. I'm going to let you live. I'm going to leave you here in your town where you've known respect. When people meet you in the street, they'll remember this moment. They'll wonder if Red Corbin was really guilty."

He turned and strode down the street, toward the hotel.

Somewhere a man said in a hushed tone, "Red Corbin must be laughin' his head off!"

IN THE upper hall of the hotel, Corbin heard a sound. Glory was waiting. She said, "I heard all of it. I was watching from a window."

"You're a hard little girl." He reached out and put his hands on her waist.

Temper flared instantly in those blue eyes. "Take your hands off me! I'm not Marie."

"Why don't you go to her? She won't marry John Mayville now. You'll have your romance, too." Her head was tipped in scorn; dark hair flowed down her back in the old free manner. "Last of the wild breed—with a pale flower in his house! Go to your precious Marie!"

"Maybe I will."

She taunted him. "Milk in her veins! You'd tire of her in a week!"

"What have you got in your veins?"

She looked away from him. "Have you ever bothered to find out?"

He tightened his hands on her waist; he pulled her to him and held her under a rough kiss. "It'll take some time to tell." He let her loose; she didn't retreat. "More time than I'll have in this town."

A small smile touched her lips. "Why do you think I'm dressed for travel?" she asked.

By WILLIAM R. COX



Cal dove right under the barrel of Rafe's gun. . . .

Sudden death was his saddle-mate—another man's grave his destiny . . . till his thundering sixes taught a bullet-torn range that a gent who'll die for peace—will also kill for it!

Fast Man—Last Man

CAL BEACH skylined the intruder against a starry sky. The man was quick enough to realize he was on the ridge and slid into the cedar break, but Cal Beach had time to go around on the south side and come up. He was

riding a small rawhide mustang and knew the country backwards and he felt pretty confident.

The Box K had been losing stock for months, and Gilly Bower was wild with rage. Nobody could get madder and blow

off more steam than Gilly Bower. He had Snorter Bailey and Dauber and Ringo Kid and Cal Beach riding range on the rustlers every night, letting the work around the ranch go hang. It was a wearisome detail and Cal Beach was tired of it, so he went after the stranger very carefully.

Cal Beach was young, only twenty-one. He was a lanky, lean cowboy with seven years experience on the job. He had a reputation as a top hand, a quiet, sober boy who never got into unnecessary ruckuses, and Gilly Bower had made him a sort of straw boss, which was as near to a foreman as Bower ever hired. Gilly liked to ramrod his own outfit, big as it was.

Cal Beach came up the slope on the other side and dropped his reins, knowing the cayuse would stand. He took his Winchester along and began stalking the woods. There was a little stream which came down the slope and cut through the cedars and he followed it, going doubled over, Indian-like, walking soft as he could on his high heels.

He almost ran into it. He jerked sideways as the fire flashed and a bullet sang near him. He shot off the Winchester from the hip and flung himself on the ground alongside the stream. A horse broke into a gallop and again he caught sight of the man.

He had the rifle raised, but he could not shoot at the broad back. He lowered his aim and fired at the horse. He was running when the bronc stumbled and threw the rider.

He flung himself on the man and got his gun. There was a knife, also, and then a patch of moonlight fell across the dazed rider's face and Cal Beach saw that he had captured Jiminez, the Mex renegade.

There was a halloo from down below on the flat, which was a Box K pasture, and Cal Beach fired his revolver three times, the signal for the boys to come up.

Then he hunkered down, holding the gun on Jiminez. After a minute the Mex grunted, rolled over, got to his knees and shook his head.

Cal Beach said "Too bad, *amigo*. You got plumb careless."

Jiminez nodded. He had a scar on the left side of his flat face and his hair was too long and greasy. He shook out the makings and rolled himself a cigarette. Cal Beach watched him closely in case he had a hideout gun, but did not try to prevent him from smoking.

The bunch was coming in, all of them. There was a small clearing alongside the stream and their horses crowded it. Cal was surprised to see Gilly Bower with them.

Bower got down and came over, rolling a little as he walked, a giant of a man, full of vim and vigor. He said in his loud, bluff way, "Good work, Cal. Jiminez, huh? Now we might git to know some-thin' about what's been goin' on."

Snorter and Dauber and the Ringo Kid sat their horses. They were plenty tough *hombres*, older men, hired by Bower for their ability to trail and shoot. Bower walked to where the Mex squatted on his haunches and stood looking down at him.

"Who is it—Rafe Morrow?" demanded the owner of Box K.

Jiminez did not speak. He puffed hard on the cigarette.

Bower laughed shortly and walked to his horse. He took a short-handled spade from behind the saddle. "Always carry it, case we should git one of these boys," he said genially, but with an underlying hardness which made Cal Beach shiver a little. He handed the shovel to the Mex. "Dig."

Jiminez slowly arose. His face was impassive in the moonlight. Choosing a spot away from the stream and near the trees, he began to dig.

"It's yore grave," Bower told him coldly. "Dig it as deep as you want. And

if you talk, mebbe you'll go into it in one piece, 'stead of half a dozen."

Jiminez said nothing. He dug, slowly but without constraint, pausing only to light another cigarette. The noise of the earth, plop, plop, piling onto a long mound got on Cal's nerves. He arose and began fading toward the trees.

Gilly Bower had the Mexican's own Bowie in his hands. "Yuh stuck many an *hombre* with this, huh? Cut the throat of better men—and cows, too. Who besides Rafe Morrow is in your crowd? Where is their shebang?"

The Mexican's back was bent, he was shoveling dirt. He said nothing.

Bower said, "I'll cut off yore ears first. Then yore fingers."

Jiminez was sweating. Cal Beach moved farther into the trees. The Box K riders sat hunched on their horses, watching, silent. Cal paused. He said diffidently, "Gilly, he won't talk. It'll jest be a bloody mess. I know him. He won't never talk."

Bower turned, staring. "Nobody asked you, Cal. This ain't yore business. Go 'long, catch up your pony and keep ridin' along the south line. Yo're a good hand, Cal—but you ain't got the guts for this." He smiled thinly. "You got a li'l chicken in you, Cal. I done noted it afore. Go 'long."

Cal stood quite still for a moment. He could see the head of the prisoner, cocked slightly as though listening. Then Jiminez went silently back to work, digging his own grave there in the cedar break.

Cal turned and did as Gilly Bower had ordered. He knew the law of the range, he knew that killing Jiminez was in the order of things. He had seen rustlers hanged before.

He caught up with his horse, reloaded and checked his weapons. He was a little sick, a little faint. Gilly was right. He was chicken, all right. Jiminez was a murderer and a thief, but Cal Beach could

never torture him to get information. Cal doubted whether he could even execute the outlaw in cold blood. He did not believe he could even haul on the rope, with others, helping to yank a man into eternity.

Life was pretty cheap on the range, but he still had a deep feeling that it was a big thing to kill a man. He heard Jiminez scream once, then he mounted and rode off at a gallop to the south. His mouth was dry and he alternately shivered and sweated, going down along the ridge and thence into the gorge country.

He was all right when the mustang slid on the rocky shale. He knew enough to get down and wait, but he was careful not to make the mistake Jiminez had made, sticking to the large rocks, managing to conceal the pony between two great outcroppings.

The canyon country south of Box K had been explored early by the searchers. But it occurred to Cal Beach now that they had not returned to look again and Rafe Morrow might have moved in. If he had done so, it would be nip and tuck. Four or five riders clattering around on the rocky slopes would merely provide easy targets for the outlaw band.

He laid up alongside a boulder and watched the northern skyline. He thought about Gilly Bower, how he had built Box K from nothing, run it up to the biggest and richest ranch in southeastern Arizona. Every cowboy dreamed of doing something like this—but Gilly had gone ahead without dreaming. There were some who said that he had wetbacked his first herd over the Rio Grande and no doubt this was true. Many another big rancher had started the same way. Maybe that was why Gilly was so down on rustlers, Cal thought, knowing what they could do, once they got started.

Rafe Morrow, for instance. Rafe wasn't much older than Cal Beach. He was tough, though, and ruthless. He had be-

gun his career in Mexico, holding up trains. He had found the pickings slim down there and returned to Missouri, where he did better. He spent his money for land over in Texas, they said. Then he had to have a herd and Rafe's way was to help himself. That's what people said. They said Rafe was merely taking back cattle Gilly had stolen and intending to use them himself to get where Gilly had got to. People found humor in this.

All Cal knew was that he worked for Gilly and was in part responsible for missing stock. He had a job to do, and he was doing it. He was not enjoying it, but he was doing it.

He saw heads along the skyline and wondered if everyone was getting careless. He recognized Gilly's big ten-gallon hat with the high crown and released the hammer on his Winchester without sound. He saw the Box K bunch pull up. Then Snorter, Dauber and the Ringo Kid went on around and Gilly rode straight in.

Cal called out, adding, "It's me, Gilly."

The rancher rode over, put his cayuse in beside Cal's mustang and hunkered down. He said, "Rafe's in there, all right. Him and Foster and Slab Jelley."

"Jiminez talked?"

"Nope. Dauber cut some sign. Earlier today. I jest wanted to make Jiminez squirm. Funny thing about them fellers." He finished rolling a cigarette, struck a match and lit it before Cal could object. "Once you ketch 'em, they give up. Jiminez dug his grave, sat down on the edge of it and started to roll another butt. I didn't have the heart to do much to him. Seen he wouldn't spill. He fell right into the grave when I gave it to him."

Cal's stomach turned over. He choked, "If Rafe's in there, we'll play hell smokin' him out."

Gilly said carelessly, "The boys will take care of that. We anchor here. The boy'll chivvy him right into our hands.

We sit up here and chop 'em down as they come."

Cal said, "The boys'll play hell chasin' 'em out of this here country."

Gilly Bower rose, stretched himself, yawned. "You gettin' to be a worse blues singer every day, Cal." He lumbered over to his horse and got down his pack. He rolled out his blankets and laid down on the rocks. "I'm plenty sleepy. Call me later and I'll stand the dawn watch. If you hear anything, it'll be Morrow and his crew comin' out."

Cal said, "It don't make sense, Gilly. Rafe'll be holed up tight and when Jiminez don't come back he'll be tetchy as a black cat on a tin roof. How them boys gonna race him out?"

"Dynamite," grinned Gilly. "Dauber useta be a hard rock miner. He kin make bombs outa tin cans. Percussion caps. The boys toss 'em in wherever they locate Morrow and his wild bunch. When they hear them things go off, they'll come a-runnin', never you fear!"

Cal said, "You sure think of everything, Gilly. Got to hand it to you for that."

"Used 'em in the old days, down around Chihuahua," said Bower sleepily. "Ruint a whole Mex regiment once. Tell yuh about it sometime." He sighed deeply and in the next breath snored.

Cal watched the big man a moment, fascinated. Gilly Bower had just maimed and killed a man with his bare hands and now he slept effortlessly and like a baby.

The owner of Box K was a tough *hombre*, all right. Cal stood up, moved to the edge of rock, looking down on the canyon out of which Rafe Morrow and his bunch would have to ride if they ran in the face of dynamite bombs. If the explosions took place, it would be a signal to Bowers and Cal they were coming. It was a simple, self-explanatory plan of things. Gilly Bower certainly thought of everything.

Midnight. There was no sound from the other end of the gorge. Cal slid behind the rock to light a cigarette. He cupped the end in his palm and walked over to the edge of the flat table on which he had taken his stand. Gilly snored and the noise seemed awfully loud.

Two o'clock by his big nickel-plated watch. He was getting very sleepy. He went over and touched Gilly, but the big man flung him off with a muttered curse.

Three o'clock. Again he tried to arouse his boss. Gilly mumbled something and would not awaken.

Four o'clock and the first hesitant fingers of dawn stretched against the stars. The air was sharp. It was neither day-break nor night, now. Cal Beach's head drooped despite all his efforts.

He awoke with a start. Something was wrong, he knew. He had his rifle across his knees and now he brought it up, staring about.

There was nothing stirring. The breeze seemed to have stopped. He walked all about the small plateau. There were shelves above them, but his spot commanded a view of them. The light was better, but still vague.

He wakened Gilly by shaking him, hard now, not sparing the big man. He said, "It's four-thirty and I'm falling asleep. Got to ketch an hour."

Bower said, thick with sleep, "Whyn't you wake me afore, dummy? Cal, sometimes I think you ain't got much sense."

Cal did not bother to answer. He stretched out on his bedroll and tilted his hat over his eyes. Sometimes Gilly Bower made him sick, but there was no sense trying to argue with the owner of Box K, because Gilly could yell louder and he never listened to what a man was saying.

When he woke up again he knew for sure something was wrong.

In the first place, his rifle was not alongside him. In the second place the

sun should have been shining on his hat, but there was a shadow across it, and when he canted his eyes sideways he could see other shadows.

He heard the voice then, and recognized its slow drawl. It was a soft, dangerous voice. "You got rich and big, Gilly. It made you careless-like. Where's Jiminez, Gilly?"

That was Rafe Morrow. Cal remembered him from five years ago, over in Sonora. He talked real slow and careful and he seldom wasted words.

It was difficult to lie there and pretend to be asleep when he knew Rafe had come in and got the drop on Bower and that others of Rafe's men were standing around throwing shadows across him. He wondered what had happened to the dynamiters.

As though in answer, Rafe said, "I'll swap, Gilly. I'll tell you what happened to your bombers."

Gilly swore viciously.

Rafe drawled on, "You hung Jiminez, huh? Or you carved him up. You always was a hand with a knife. Remember the time you dug outa the hoosegow in Wilcox, Gilly? I was just a button then. I found you a hoss, didn't I?"

Bower said hoarsely, "I got nothin' personal agin you, Rafe. You shoulda left my herd alone."

"I shoulda? Why?"

Bower could not answer this. He could have answered it if Dauber and Snorter and Ringo Kid had been able to do their jobs, Cal knew. Bnt now he could not say anything sensible. Now he was out on a long limb.

He was in bad trouble, because Rafe Morrow had a certain code. The best outlaws always rode with Rafe on account of this one thing: he stuck by his men, defended them when possible and when they were killed, he avenged them.

Gilly Bower had been too confident and cocky to give weight to this when he

had killed Jiminez. He thought he had been about to close in on Rafe Morrow then. But now Gilly would be thinking of it, as Cal was thinking of it. Now the shoe was on the other foot, and so far as Cal was concerned it was pinching pretty hard.

Rafe was saying gently, "You shouldn't've done it, Gilly. I coulda tied you up and took your steers and gone about my business. But now you went and did what you did to Jiminez and I got to take care of you. Dauber talked, Gilly. Don't blame him too much, he had a Bowie in him and he was dyin' and he spilled."

Cal twitched beneath his hat. So they had killed Dauber and Snorter and Ringo, just as Gilly had killed Jiminez. The rights and wrongs of this thing were getting confused. Did they have a right to kill because Gilly had killed?

He put the thought aside. They were outlaws. Jiminez was an outlaw too, a killer and a rustler. Gilly had the law of the range on his side.

But what was the law of the range? Might makes right?

It didn't matter any, Cal thought, which was law and which was right. What mattered was that Rafe Morrow had them cold-decked. Gilly had been dumb enough to let them get the drop, probably from the rocks above. Gilly had figured too much on Dauber and the dynamite and hadn't watched like he should. No doubt they had been up there when Cal went to sleep; he remembered that feeling when he dozed that time.

Gilly couldn't do anything but curse. His voice was not so loud and blustery now, though. He swore in a monotone. Cal lay very still, wondering if Gilly was scared.

It occurred to him then to note that he himself was not as scared as he should be. He pondered this as Rafe went on, building a case against Gilly, as though

Rafe needed to make himself very mad before he did what he was going to do to both Gilly and Cal. For of course Dauber would have told Rafe that Cal brought Jiminez down and held him for Gilly, and that sealed Cal's doom. Rafe and his boys never did anything half way.

That was it, he guessed. Like Gilly had said about Jiminez. When you were taken and the jig was up, you accepted it. You were always taught to take things as they came and never show the white feather. You got yourself into a frame of mind to do just that. So Cal wasn't as scared as he should be, he thought. He wasn't near as upset as he had been when Gilly was going at Jiminez, for instance.

He wondered whether he hadn't better wake up. They might shoot him while he lay there, with his hat over his eyes. That would be bad. He got a little panicky thinking of that. It wouldn't be any good to get it that way.

He heard Gilly say in that new, lowered voice, "Reckon we can make a deal, Rafe. Reckon we understand one another."

"A deal?" said the soft voice.

"You got Dauber and the boys. That satisfies your way of doin' things," said Gilly. His words tumbled over each other. "You don't wanta kill no more. There'll be a hell of a posse after you if you kill me," said Gilly.

"Nope. No more'n there'll be now," said Rafe calmly.

"I'll be missed," Gilly insisted. "The sheriff'll be lookin' for me in town today."

"Sheriff Fatso?" Rafe laughed. "I'll be gone before he wakes up. My boys and your cattle will be gone, Gilly."

There was a little silence. Then Gilly's voice was almost a whisper. "Rafe—there's the boy brought Jiminez down. Right there, sleepin'. He's the one."

Nobody said anything at all for a long moment, then. Cal lay still as a mouse. He had to lie still to digest the full mean-

ing of Gilly's treacherously soft words.

And only a few hours before he had been thinking what a hard *hombre* Gilly Bower was!

He did not stir for all the time the outlaws stood staring at Gilly. When Rafe said finally, "I seen some bad ones in my time. I seen some real bad ones. But you take the cake, Gilly," Cal rolled over and shoved the hat away from his face.

He saw Rafe, holding a rifle negligently under his arm. He saw Foster and Slab, narrow-shouldered riders, hatchet-faced, alert. They were properly spread out and they had Gilly's guns and Cal's armament in a little pile between Rafe and Foster. They knew their business, these fellows.

Cal sat up. He said, "Well, howdy, Rafe."

The outlaw was a small man, bow-legged, sandy-complected. He said, "Hi, Cal. Gotcha in a jackpot. Yore boss got lazy and only looked one way, like he expected us to come a-runnin' down the canyon."

Cal said, "You musta roped Dauber and them or I'd of heard yuh."

"There wasn't any shootin'," nodded Rafe pleasantly. "I figgered you and Gilly'd be up here a-hopin'."

Cal spread his hands and leaned back on them. The stone was warming up and the seat of his pants absorbed it. He said, "It's sure gonna be a nice day."

"Hope so," said Rafe. "We got a long ride and a lotta work to do."

Gilly burst forth, "You cain't kill us, Rafe. They'll hang yuh sure as shootin'."

Cal looked at his boss then. The big man was standing against the tall boulder, his wide shoulders flat on the rock. His hands were shaking. His face was white and old and haunted.

It was pitiful to look at Gilly Bower then. Cal had to look away. It was bad enough to be killed in the early morning in this rocky place, where they couldn't even dig a grave, if they had a mind to

bury a fellow. It was worse to see a man suffer like Gilly Bower.

Maybe it was because Gilly had so much to live for, the ranch, his herd, the money in the town bank, Nelly Horstman, the baker's daughter he was courting. Maybe if a man had so much to lose it was harder to die.

Cal didn't have anything to lose but his life. He gathered his legs under him and started to get up. A lizard moved sluggishly from under a rock and crawled into the sun, wiggling his brown length gratefully. Cal said, "Hello, little guy. Nice sun, ain't it?"

He stood up, shaking himself so that his joints limbered a little. He said briskly, "Well, Rafe. you better git it over with if yo're goin' to steal cattle today."

Rafe said, "I know, Cal. But I'm kinda wonderin' about this hard *hombre*, this boss of yours. It's a lesson, seems like, seein' him shiver and shake and tryin' to lay off the blame on you. It's a lesson to all of us."

Cal said, "Ain't no use to go on like thet, Rafe. Gilly's a good boss and I got nothin' to say agin him. Whyn't you get it over with? No man likes to stand around waitin'."

Foster and Slab agreed with him, he could tell that. Their hard faces were taut with the strain. They had a hard ride ahead, for Gilly had been telling the truth. If he did not appear in town, the posse would form. Law-abiding people had to take steps when the outlaws struck too close to home. The fat sheriff was lazy, but he knew when to act and he would act.

Rafe said, "Reckon you're right, Cal. I'm plumb sorry for you—you ain't nothin' but a hired hand. Gilly, he's got it comin'. Gilly, he ain't a bit o' good. He's yella. He's tough when he's in the saddle and he ain't tough when he's down. Got no use for a man like Gilly."

Rafe lifted the rifle. He held it steady

on Gilly. He said, "This ain't hard to do. I promise you, Gilly, it'll be quick and I don't mind doin' it."

That was when Cal moved. He knew it wasn't any use moving, he knew what would happen. But he also knew he was not going to stand still and be shot by Rafe Morrow nor anyone like him.

He dove straight under the barrel of Rafe's gun. Both Foster and Slab fired at him, but because he had been palaver-ing with Rafe and taking it easy, pretend-ing he wasn't scared at all, they hadn't been watching him so close.

He knocked Rafe sideways when he jumped. Rafe wasn't very big nor heavy. The rifle went off and a bullet sailed to-ward the sunny morning sky.

Rafe brought the gun down again, yelling, "Get thet crazy coot!"

Gilly Bower came away from the rock. He came with a rush and with both long arms spread wide.

Rafe was sprawling. He had the rifle in his right hand, but he had lost his balance and the rifle was pinned to earth because his weight was on his right arm. He hung still there a precious moment.

Cal rolled over the pile of guns between Rafe and Foster. He grabbed a revolver and kept right on rolling. He managed to kick out as he went and entangle Foster's leg. Then he rolled some more, unable to believe he had not been hit, but knowing this was because rifles are not the best weapons at close quarters.

Gilly Bower had closed the gap. Cal came up to his feet, kicking energetically. He held the revolver steady. He crouched half behind the rocks where the horses neighed and stirred and kicked up sparks from the shale.

Gilly Bower swept his arms together. He was a very strong man and very quick. In a rough and tumble, Cal knew, he had proven himself a hundred times. He was a real scrapper with his bare hands, Gilly was. When he brought his arms together

he had the nape of Foster's neck in one hand and the hair of Slab's head in the other.

They both tried to use their rifles. The long barrels got tangled up in the melee. They went off and again bullets sung. Gilly swept the heads of the outlaws inexorably together. There was a sound like coconuts falling—and breaking—a sort of ringing sound.

Cal said, and now his voice was not quiet nor resigned, but shrill and sharp and quick, "All right, Rafe. Hold it."

Rafe was trying to get off the rifle he was pinning down with his right hand. When he heard Cal speak and saw what happened to Slab and Foster, he stopped trying. He stayed where he was, his hand still on the gun he would never use.

Cal said, "Get up, Rafe, without the gun."

Gilly Bower had dropped the two out-laws from his grasp. His face was suf-fused with blood now, his eyes wild. He grabbed up one of the fallen rifles. Slab and Foster lay one atop the other. Blood ran from a long wound in Slab's scalp.

Rafe was on his feet. He stood there, his gun still holstered at his side, but Gilly had the rifle on him now.

Cal's revolver came around. He said, "Drop it, Gilly!"

The big man started. His bloodshot eyes glared at Rafe, then at Cal.

Cal said, "Drop it, or I'll drop you and go with Rafe and to hell with you, Gilly!"

Gilly Bower lowered the muzzle of the Winchester.

Cal said, "Step outa yore belt, Rafe. Step easy, now."

Rafe unbuckled the belt and walked out of it, his hands quiet. He looked unblink-ing at Cal. He said in his soft voice, "I was gonna do you in, Cal."

"That's all right," said Cal Beach. "Ne'mine what you was gonna do. You

(Continued on page 126)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 125)

HERE'S your chance to test your knowledge of the West and of rangeland subjects in general. Below are twenty questions designed to separate the Pecos Bills from the genuine Mossbacks. Answer eighteen or more of them correctly without reaching for the apple, and you're topnotch. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're good. But answer fewer than fourteen and you rate only fair. Good luck, *amigo!*

1. If, while riding on the desert you saw a man a considerable distance in front of you, and he took off his hat and waved it in a semicircle from left to right, what would you do?

2. True or false? The expression, "turned the cat," is used in reference to a horse which steps into a hole and falls.

3. What is the slang meaning of the phrase "taking up a homestead?"

4. True or false? In the language of the cowpoke, a "short-trigger man" is a sheriff.

5. True or false? Texas once passed a law prohibiting the use of the running iron as a branding iron.

6. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "reaching for the apple."

7. True or false? The Western expression, "put his saddle in the wagon," is used to indicate that a cowpoke has just been killed.

8. In what Western state would you probably be most likely to find the term, "pitching," used in place of the word, "bucking?"

9. If the ranch boss sent you to a "*junta*," which of the following things would you be most likely to do? Talk? Eat? Sleep?

10. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "lamb licker," which of the following things

should you return with? A small stick used in herding lambs? A shepherd? A western outlaw?

11. On which side should you mount a horse which is "Indian broke?"

12. "Hen fruit stir" is which of the following items? Pancakes? Stock dip? Poor whisky?

13. True or false? According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a "gun shark" is a person who makes his living selling guns.

14. True or false? "Gelding smacker" is a Western slang term used in reference to a saddle.

15. What is a "dogger?"

16. True or false? A horse is said to "crow hop" when he takes big, long leaps while bucking.

17. True or false? "Chinning the moon" is an expression used in connection with a horse which rears on its hind legs and paws with its front feet.

18. If the ranch boss gave you permission to "calf 'round," what would you do?

19. True or false? A "breaking pen" is a small pen used for the purpose of breaking horses.

20. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "bounce?"

Night bullets sang of their final ride—the
hell-bent six on a lawforsaken trail—
bullets that whispered . . . "This
night we die!"



Ewing had dropped off the rear boot
when the coach hit the road. . . .

By **W. EDMUNDS CLAUSSEN**

DEAD MAN'S RUN

THE correspondent for a great Eastern newspaper tried to juggle his pad on one knee while he wrote within the jolting stagecoach.

We are completely alienated from the world, he scribbled. It is intensely dark without and my mind keeps playing with the fanciful thought of Indians. But I am certain our driver would not stop if they

were about him. He paused, deep concentration lines etched against his brows. An idea came to him and he bent to his pad, which was poorly illuminated by a single candle's flutter.

I cannot see his face, but I know what it would be like. He is a hale fellow, searching the crawling darkness from his high seat. A watchful, sober man. I do not

know what forgotten territory sired him, but I am sure he can have no feelings within.

A call shattered the stillness. "Hello inside the coach! Blow out your light!"

The candle went out immediately and Bailey pulled himself around on the driver's seat. He looked ahead, and for a moment his mind was constructing a brutal picture of death on the trail, but the next moment it was gone. His consciousness was brim full of the tension on his reins, the violent grating of tire irons against rock.

The stagecoach topped out of a shallow wash, its six horses straining in their traces. Bailey could tell there were Apaches beyond the mouth of the canyon. A man bred in the Chiricahuas could sense them a mile away. There was still no thought in Bailey's mind of halting the coach.

On the seat beside him he noticed Prout Dexler made no move to carry the bugle to his mouth. This was the first time in three years of service Prout had failed to sound the notes. An unpardonable breach of duty on the conductor's part when nearing a relay station.

Bailey wondered whether death would really matter to those inside. Would the world actually miss any of them? Perhaps somewhere a soul might mourn for one brief hour, and then that would wear thin. All of them would be forgotten. Even the scribbler. Even the woman.

He wondered about her a little. Jane McKeown, her ticket had read. Probably going to Fort Bowie to marry an officer. They generally did.

She had been asleep since midnight, her brown head slumped innocently against the gentleman next to her. He was Taylor Ewing, an ex-Confederate raider. Tay had had a hard life. The War had not helped a bit. His father, George Ewing, retained Northern sympathies and it had rubbed him raw to have Tay throw in with

Kirby-Smith. He had disinherited his boy.

Tay Ewing was riding west expecting a few last words with his father. He didn't yet know that a couple of mornings ago George Ewing had died on his Tucson ranch.

The third passenger, riding beside the scribbler, was a blotchy-faced man whose snores had sounded off and on since ten o'clock. He'd tossed an empty *tequila* bottle into the sage near Soldier's Farewell. Bailey didn't know much about this man, Eric Brown.

Mesilla barroom gossip told of a gambler killed on an El Paso street. The Mesilla stableman had found a winded horse at his nearby rack. He'd brought him into the Overland stable and tried to doctor him up. But the horse had sunk down to the floor and never gotten up. He'd been ridden to death in the night. Bailey's mind supplied the necessary links between these two points.

The bleak sky broke suddenly and a single star showed over the humped mountains. Another. The moon flooded out and caught *El Peloncillo*, the peak, in a livid whiteness. It was unexpected, as abrupt and stark as lifting a curtain on a dawn massacre.

This was a land of empty space around Stein's Station. A land of dim, haunting horizons with only the pyramidal headstone of *El Peloncillo* lifting from the dead chapparal of the basin floor. Prout Dexler gave a relieved grunt. Dexler still had four young babies squalling around a Tucson cabin. His fingers twisted in their pressure on his shotgun.

"Still no sign of 'Dobe Jones," Dexler grunted.

Bailey knew what was in his mind. Dexler's eyes crawled hungrily around the slab-rock station and found no sign of the eastbound stage. They should have passed 'Dobe Jones an hour ago. He said sagely, "Maybe 'Paches piled down some rock. Doubtful Canyon's a hell of a strip to get

holed up in. But 'Dobe's probably all right. Maybe turned his horses—or maybe he never left San Simon at all."

"Ye-ah," Dexler murmured. His voice was thick. "We'll soon find that out."

Bailey didn't answer. He tooled his heavy-legged teams into the station's gate. As though by magic the iron-studded doors swung inward. François kept a couple of Mexican kids on their toes for this job whether the Overland horn sounded or not.

'Dobe Jones' coach was not inside the station yard. François was the station agent of Stein's. He was, of course, French. He had come into the frontier in the late 'forties—a little too late for the beaver. There were some who knew his father had been a professor at the University of Paris, but not many. Fewer knew of François' love of literature.

His stocky frame filled the doorway to the passenger's room and then his fat outline wobbled as he hiked across the yard. He stood by the fore end of the coach, waiting.

"Well?" Bailey asked.

François stroked the white crop of whisgers. "Mangas Coloradas," he said explicitly. "Came at sundown and asked a dozen sacks of corn for his horses. I turned him down, *M'sieu'*."

Bailey nodded. For once the smile had disappeared from the Frenchman's cherubic face. His Mexican boys were unhitching the horses and a fresh relay was being led from the fenced area yonder. The scribbler, inside, wrote hastily, *We have arrived on the brink-edge of a cauldron. Lord knows at what moment we shall pitch into the hellfire!*

Dexler was on the ground, routing out the passengers. Tay Ewing climbed down, stiff and dusty. Eric Brown came out literally rolling, his stiff limbs buckled from the ceaseless jolting. Bailey caught the girl stirring inside. Ewing reached into the coach and gallantly brought her down.

In that one swift moment her eyes swept to the driver's seat and clung. There was sleep in them, certainly. But Bailey read more, much more. It seemed to him he caught a revelation through a momentarily drawn curtain. She was frightened into the vital core of her being, and in her limpid weakness her guard was down. The faint moonglow did little for her beauty; it was faraway, pleading, and it got into a man, inside. Bailey knew she was expecting more than he could vouch for. She looked to him for safety in this raw canyon of rock and red fury and death.

He felt his veins drain under the impact of this knowledge. Life was made up of shadows moving across a screen uncertain as powdersmoke. When the vapor drifted, the picture drew nearer, less diffused. He had a momentary glimpse of piled-up rock in Doubtful Canyon, the coach lying overturned before it, smoldering, a half dozen figures sprawled there inert and twisted upon the shale floor. Jane McKeown was among them. Mutilated and stiff and no longer beautiful. Massacres by Apaches were like that.

In that moment he made up his mind inflexibly. He spoke low to François. "Let your Mexes take their horses back. The stage ain't going anywhere."

"*M'sieu'?*"

"Tell your wife to serve up meals and get beds ready for four passengers."

François' expression remained much as it was, despite his dancing gaze. "You are wise, with 'Paches ready for sport."

"All right. They ain't going to get us," he said.

HE FELT the flush of shame push above his collar. In all the years that had gone by, he had never voluntarily pulled a coach off its schedule. He came down onto the station ground with his younger years very clear about him.

His father had thrown up a hut in the Chiricahuas ten years before anyone thought of settling there. They'd had skirmishes with Indians. Apaches, Comanches, Cheyennes—the whole gamut of fighting tribes. That was one way of living with Indians. The powdersmoke way.

The other way was with honesty and bravery, which counted for more. His father had become a blood brother to one of the chieftains. They hadn't taken him in for welching either on courage or responsibility.

Bailey was reviewing some of this as he hiked toward the stage room where Tay Ewing and the fugitive from El Paso were waiting. Dexler walked with him toward the door, but Dexler wasn't looking at him. He was saying quietly, "I guess 'Dobe ain't left San Simon at that. Don't hear any shootin' from the canyon."

Ewing cut in harshly, "Look fellow, I aim to ride tonight. If you ain't got the guts to tackle it, I'll handle the reins."

Bailey let his eyes snap to Ewing. He let them lie on the man coolly, indifferently. Neither broke their glances. The man Brown sputtered over Ewing's shoulder, "He's right. I—I got business in Tucson to tend to."

Bailey said sharply, "Get inside."

He pushed them back into the long, low-ceilinged room. Already he smelled the boiling beans and beef stew and he knew Minnie would be in the kitchen. She was broad as François was edgewise. She was a halfbreed Creek woman François had hitched onto years ago.

Bailey slid behind a pine counter and hunted a bottle of prize Napoleon brandy he knew was here. From some deep interior of the station he caught the cry of a baby. In daylight the yard was always full of them and nobody had ever been sure how many children Minnie had brought into the world. A half smile crept about Bailey's mouth.

"How many kids you got, François?"

The Frenchman glanced up from sliding plates onto his table. "Seven, *M'sieu*."

The puncheon floor passed along a tremor and then Minnie stuck herself indignantly through the slab portals. "Eight," she corrected.

"*Mon Dieu!*" François moaned. "I have overlooked the little one!"

Jane McKeown strode in from a tiny cubicle attached to the main room. Her eyes flicked over Bailey. "Look," she said smoothly, "I appreciate how difficult it is to take a coach through that canyon, but I must be traveling tonight. I simply must."

Bailey filled her brandy glass. Her voice had been low, musical, and without looking at her he knew her face would be composed. She had pulled herself together nicely. He filled Tay Ewing's glass and passed it onward to Brown before he turned to Jane. "In a hurry, ma'am?"

She bit her lip, nodded. Ewing said frostily, "Of course you can't take her through. But us men can. I'll drive the stage through with or without your say-so."

Bailey said slowly, "Ma'am, it must be a wedding. They all come out to marry a boy at Fort Bowie. Ever think he'd rather see you a day late than to have to build you a grave?"

He didn't look at her, pouring the scribbler's brandy. He knew he had handed her a jolt. But Ewing was insistent.

"It's been seven years since the old man considered me anything but a damned Rebel. He's a stiff-backed Massachusetts—well, we'll let it lay there. Now he's willing to overlook those things and talk to me. You think I want to hang around this stinkin' station?"

It came to the edge of Bailey's lips to tell Tay that George Ewing was dead. He bit it back harshly. What was the use? Spoil a man's last hours on earth, per-

haps. He said, instead, "You seen a lot, Ewing. Raiding with Kirby-Smith made you tough and you think you seen all the ugliness and the death that can be seen. Maybe you did see some of it. But you can take this last to bed with you—you ain't seen any kind of grisly death unless it's Apache death!"

Around the edge of a silence they heard François' voice. The scribbler had penned him in a corner and they had opened a book. François' voice drifted over the room.

Up with my tent; here will I lie tonight,
But where, tomorrow?—well, all's one for
that.

"Writer!" Tay Ewing's voice snapped hard. When the stoop-shouldered man came up Tay said, "We're two or three to one now. Where do you stand in this?"

The scribbler stood sober a full moment. "I don't count. I'm not an individual, you see. I represent my paper. I go or I stay, it doesn't matter. I'm merely reporting."

"Then you would go?" Bailey asked.

"Why of course."

François warned soberly, "An hour ago there was firing. It has stopped now, but I do not think the 'Paches have flown."

Bailey ignored him. He said, "The writer votes along with you, Ewing. So I'm alone in this. Lift your glass with me. When the soldiers from Fort Bowie clear a way through the canyon you'll see Tucson. Not before!"

Ewing uttered a thick curse and threw his brandy to the floor. The heel of his cavalry boot ground the glass into the dirt.

The inside of Stein's station was too much for a troubled man to endure. Tay Ewing's flaming anger, Prout Dexler's shifted glance, the girl with her drawn cheeks had got into him. Bailey wandered into the night. There was hunger in him, but not the hunger after food.

The gate was still ajar and he noticed that immediately. He hiked to it, his gaze

climbing first to the stars and then to the swell of the basin floor. Patches of catclaw made smudges of dark stain against the starlit sand. It was possible, he conceded, that the Apaches were entirely cleared out.

He stoked a rough briar with burley tobacco while he pondered. He didn't believe that, actually. Presently he moved out from the station. Moonlight knifed the planes of his face and touched his high cheekbones. He was twenty-seven; tonight he looked forty. His blue chambray shirt was soaked under each arm from perspiration. But that had accumulated hours before. Now his skin was dry.

Jane McKeown had gotten into his mind. It would seem more natural for her to cringe and demand to be put down at the station. Genteel women usually finished up like that. But there was a mystery about this woman, a baffling strength. Her face had been white with a crawling fear and yet he sensed how her eyes had gleamed. Her mouth had been a firm line and she had been ready to fight him. A man didn't like to see that kind of woman fade out of his life.

He moved noiselessly through the shallow sand. The Overland spring lay between two leafy cottonwoods a hundred yards yonder and the Mex boys had led the weary horses over this trail to water. He moved nearer, a wariness stroking his nerves. When he had covered more than half the distance he threw himself behind a catclaw. The yap of a wolf pierced the canyon and sent his fingers curling around his pistol.

Had this been real or a warning sent by Apaches? His eyes pushed deeper into the clustered catclaw. Faint starlight glinted from a gun barrel and his hand pulled up his Colt.

HE SHOT quickly and somewhere a gurgling scream died out. The catclaw parted to let an Apache slide onto the sand. Immediately the

horses thrashed and snorted. But the Mex boys had them in hand and were driving them homeward with switches. From another quarter, a second warrior opened fire with his rifle. Bailey saw the long tongue-lance out and immediately let drive again. This time he missed.

The Apache, too, failed to down his Mexican hostler, but a horse shrilled and went down thrashing. Then Bailey kept the warrior busy while the horses stormed by on their way to the station. With his third shot he caught the sodden thud of lead and knew his fight was over. He turned back, searching shadows.

Dexler met him when he was halfway to the station.

"Pretty near made off with that bunch," he murmured.

Bailey let it go without comment. He was thinking of the Mex kids, not the horses. They were good kids and a life was worth more than a slug of Indian lead. The other man let go a long tobacco streamer. "You hear what François said about the shootin'?"

"I guess I didn't miss anything."

"An hour ago. That would make it about the time 'Dobe would be comin' through. He was a rough old man, but a good one. You think maybe—" his voice trailed off.

"I been thinking," Bailey nodded. They slipped into the yard and he paused and they fastened the gate. "Dexler, suppose you were to throw saddles on two horses. You an' me might chase into the canyon a piece."

The men had come into the yard; Ewing and Brown crowded in close with François and the scribbler behind them. The ex-cavalry rider had an unyielding fiber woven through his voice. "You're not thinking of going without me?"

"Look, Ewing, it'll be better for you to stay at the station. Prout and me—"

Ewing's fist hammered the rest back into his mouth. It was so unexpected it

caught Bailey off guard. He knew then the whipsawed edge had broken from the other's temper. There was nothing personal in the attack; simply a deep-seated conviction flaring into violence. He took Ewing's second fist in the chest and then stepped back.

When he struck it was a solid, driving blow that caught the flat of Ewing's chin. The fighter went down like dead weight and Bailey stepped away. His chest ached as from a saber slash and already he was drawing for breath. That Ewing was a fighter.

Anger blazed through him and he said sharply, "François, lift this damn hothead to the coach. Put four horses in the traces. We're going after 'Dobe." He wheeled rapidly, his hot stare casting over the others. "Anybody else? Just the men."

All of them but François took a step forward and Dexler's dry grin broadened. Bailey said, "I'm going in for extra rifles."

He went inside and his glance met Minnie ladling stew into their platters. There were no nerves under Minnie's deep-laid fat veins and her glance slid over him without emotion. It didn't matter how violent men grew so long as it wouldn't keep François from settling beside his bookstand.

Beside the gun rack stood the younger woman. He said slowly, "Miss McKeown, you'll remain here," and then he saw she held a short-barreled derringer at her waist.

She lowered her hand while he stared and then stepped nearer. The blood had left her cheeks and he saw the shots outside had gripped her in fear. She sank a little with a short cry and his arms swept about her waist. She was racing through him like raw wine. "Oh, no!" she murmured, "you can't leave me behind!"

"We're only going after 'Paches."

"Take me along with you." She lifted her face and her full look met him. The yielding pressure of her body was beating

its way through his brain and her soft pulsing made him weak. Her cheeks were no more than inches beyond; her gaze deep and luminous. It was more than a man could forgive of any woman and he bent and met her mouth.

She drew away after that brief kiss. Fire crept into her eyes and then died. Still she clung to him. The fear was there, white and stark in her face. Her lips held a defeated smile.

"All right," she whispered, "I'll pay my fare!"

She stood on her toes to search his mouth. Her lips crushed against him warmly.

THE FIRST rose powdered the Eastern sky when they quit the room. They placed Jane McKeown on the rear seat and stacked the mail bags around her. She held the tiny derringer to her lap with motionless hands. A woman waiting and driving ahead into what?

He climbed to his place and unwound the ribbons. Lord, how hollow living seemed! Was this, then, the purpose for which he had hired to Overland? To drive Jane McKeown into a canyon sculptured with living rock and death—a narrow way from which there was no retreat?

Inside they went bravely in their ignorance and haste. Bailey, who lashed the horses between the corral posts, knew a deeper courage, ripened in the knowledge of how Apaches fought.

Dexler held his shotgun between his knees. A new Spencer barrel gleamed in his hands. He murmured, "We'll have the light at our backs. More'n we had an hour ago. They'll be breakfastin' at San Simon when we roll up."

Now some alien thought touched Dexler's sense of humor and he chuckled. The force of his mood reached Bailey and he let his eyes play around. It was strange how a man's mind could pick a thread in his deepest hour. Dexler said, "Take that

Eric Brown. The only reason the bird's got a lot of sand in the craw's because he's so allmighty scared right now. Happen to hear his talk to François.

"You know why he's so het up for trav-elin'? He's been makin' up to some Mexican lady—not knowin' she's married. Her husband pulled in on a freight outfit and yanked a knife on the fat old miscreant and Eric lit out a-hellin'. He ain't scared of 'Paches—not Eric Brown!"

"You mean he didn't smoke down the gambler at El Paso?"

"Not at all! He was lookin' at himself in the twinklin' eyes of a Mexican wench and he thinks there's some Pedro on his trail!"

He thought no more of this for now the horses were pulling hard in their collars. The long, quarter-mile bend into the canyon's mouth lay behind. They entered a rocky portal that led them due west into the valley of the San Simon. From this point Overland drivers kept their dead run until they cleared the canyon ten miles further on.

ON THEIR left the Peloncillas stood high and straight above them. On their right the ground sloped before it climbed again; a barren malpais studded with *ocotillo*. A mile yonder the walls pinched in, and here lay the gauntlet run by each mail. The trail-side lay marked with wrecks dead stage-men had left behind.

They gained speed here on their gradual descent. It was a good roadbed shot with only a few cross-washes where they smashed down on reach and bolster and then flew away, bouncing on their leather braces. The sun rose against their backs and now, at last, they could see.

Here the Apaches had rolled their rock. He saw it leap before him in the gray dawn. Great boulders had been levered from the rimtop and piled where they might smash them in the dark. There

was a baited moment in which the horses charged blindly at the barricade and then Bailey tooled them off the roadbed. He slammed his brake so the coach would drag. Then they crashed over the slope.

Dexler went off the seat and grabbed wildly at the deck railing. The slope ran perhaps forty yards to a sandy wash below. It was narrow and rock-strewn and the canyon wall rose from the edge of this wash, towering nearly a thousand feet. There would be no Apaches on this rim. If he could hold the coach on its wheels they might win through. But Apache guns from the opposite wall were hammering at them.

He heard Ewing let out a Rebel raiding yell and then the roar of his Springfield crashed into it. The Spencers were banging inside the coach. Along the left rim-top Bailey picked out walnut-colored bodies strung in a line. The Apaches were staring down dumbfounded while he drove the horses through the *ocotillo*.

Rocks careened between their wheels and Bailey knew a knifing dread. The Spencers made less noise inside and the sensation of bullet-splintered panels was with him above all else. The roan wheeler fought to stay on his feet while the other horses dragged him forward.

Now when he was up and pulling again two hundred yards still lay before them. The trail came down and crossed the wash here, but Bailey couldn't hold the coach. The cut was deeply clogged. He pulled his teams back to the slope and lashed them.

A red furrow ran across Dexler's face and one arm was bleeding. He threw fresh cartridges into his chamber and stared at Bailey. "You got an arrow 'tween your shoulders!" he yelled.

But Bailey didn't hear. The cords of his neck were knotted and his eyes were sick. Dexler reached with his good arm and got his grip fixed on the point of the shaft. He could just feel the head of the arrow

and it was slippery in his touch. He went in after it a little and pulled at it like working a tooth out of its socket.

Something had broken in the coach. But they went on, slower, the horses gaining their feet on the roadbed. Again Ewing's yell pierced the canyon. It was followed by the curdling screams of the Apaches. Dexler turned on his seat.

A half-dozen mounted redskins were racing after them; and Ewing had dropped off the rear boot when the coach came back onto the road. He was flat in the rock with his gun smoking the redskins. Between shots his Rebel yell cut above the Apache war chant.

"That's the end of Tay," Dexler groaned. "Didn't last long after old George!"

Bailey couldn't look at Tay Ewing. He was too busy with his horses; all four were running blood from Apache bullets.

They fought their way through until the valley opened before them. Ewing's shots came intermittently. Each time he shot his Confederate yell pierced the canyon. Gradually his shots lessened. But by throwing away his life he had held the Apaches back and let the coach run through.

A mile across the long swells lay San Simon Station. Bailey could see a Concord pull away from the gray adobe walls. Flankers on either side rode with rifles. It was then his lead team went down and they ground to a halt. Dexler had slumped to the floor-boards. Bailey shook him by the shoulder.

"'Dobe's riding out to save us!" A faint grin worked about his mouth. "Don't that sound kind of familiar?" He lost some of his grin and bent closer. "How bad is it, Dexler?"

"Last ball knocked out the wind, that's all."

Bailey promised quietly, "We'll send the army ambulance from Fort Bowie. We'll get you through."

"Sure, I'll be all right," and Dexler bit his teeth against the pain.

Bailey jumped aground and swung about his coach. He couldn't force his eyes to look above the splintered door panels. A cold dread gnawed inside.

"Will you please let me out?"

She came down with her face mealy white, her eyes racing. He felt a weakness flutter through her and he stood a moment with her tight to his chest. Her hands brushed the damp spot on his back and she pulled away abruptly. "You're all right, Bailey?"

He nodded. The throatiness of her voice left him quiet. She drew from him completely and shrank from the coach. "Then look to the ones—inside!"

He found Eric Brown unconscious on the forward seat. A rock hurled by the Apaches had knifed through the thin roof-deck and struck Brown on the temple. He was otherwise unharmed. The scribbler lay huddled on the floor. Bailey turned him over and a loose page fluttered from his notebook. It held a flowery script, and unconsciously Bailey clasped it in his fingers. The scribbler was dead.

Later, in 'Dobe's coach, he remembered that paper. They were swinging over the trail to San Simon Station with Dexler and Brown propped in the forward seat. He shared the opposite seat with Jane McKeown. Her face held straight ahead and her look was grave. He tried to put a gentleness into his voice. "Won't be long till you reach Fort Bowie."

Her eyes were still dead ahead. "I'm only going to Bowie because I couldn't afford a ticket any further west. There isn't any soldier waiting, Bailey."

"Sure, ma'am?"

"You said that, not I. Bailey, I'm running away. I'm scared. That horse they found in Mesilla—I rode him to death. Have you ever seen a man killed?"

He held her look and nodded. Her face was tight and frozen. "That El Paso

gambler was my husband. It was a—a mistake that we married. He only wanted me as a come-on for his rondo table. I wouldn't do it and he lashed me with a whip. I ran away and he came after me with the whip and—"

Her face dipped into her cupped palms and he took her wrists and moved them away slowly.

"Somebody else shot him! Someone he'd cheated; I suppose followed him down the street. I saw him go to the planks and then I looked at the pistol in my hand. It was so ghastly! Something snapped inside. I—I took the nearest horse and rode to Mesilla."

Jane McKeown caught at his free hand. It brought him a deep inward stirring. When a man owned a snug, soundly-built house in a secluded valley he was a fool not to settle down. The arrow hole in his back might make him do that. He might run cattle in his valley. It was not too far from Dexler's.

He brought her gently against his shoulder. A soft smile was working his mouth. "You know what they do to hossthieves in the Territory? They hang 'em, ma'am."

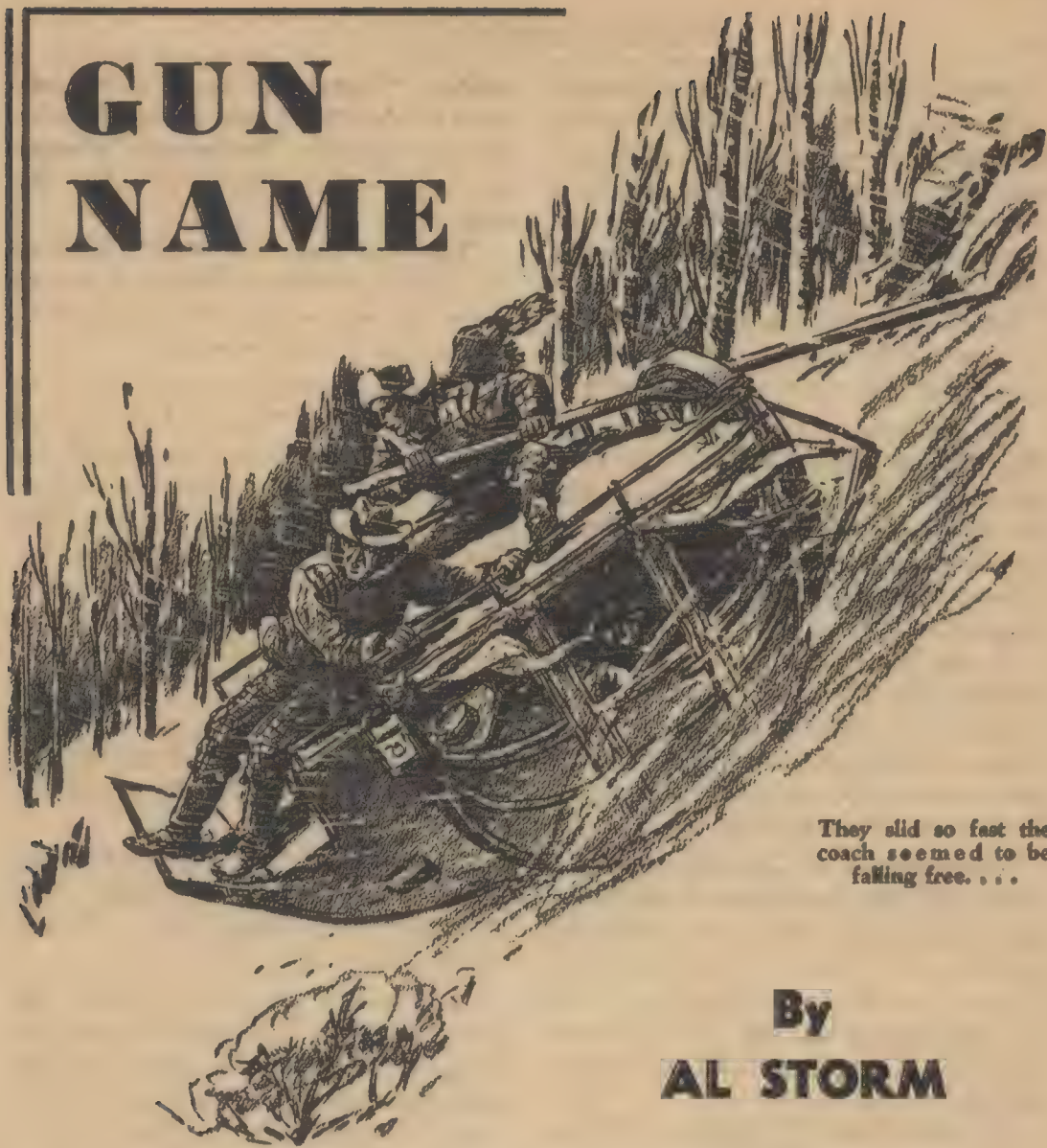
She got out a quiet sob. "Oh, no."

"That is, they hang 'em—when they can catch 'em," he said. It was then, oddly, he thought of the crumpled paper. He opened his hand.

The first Apache screams are shattering the canyon. He sits there, impervious to all danger. I doubt if woman ever stirred him before; yet her face must be constantly before him— Here the scribbler ended.

Bailey stared at the paper, a frown on his face. The words were meaningless. He would have been amazed had he known the scribbler had referred to him. He reached through the window and let the wind catch the sheet. It drifted over the trail and lay against the bear grass. Face up—staring at the brassy desert sun that would bleach it white.

GUN NAME



They slid so fast the
coach seemed to be
falling free. . . .

By
AL STORM

*Give a man a gun name—and he's likely to carve it on a
better man's bullet!*

McCLARY used his shoulder to boost the door shut. The sibilant whine of sleet-choked wind became a murmuring undertone filling the quiet of the stage office. He could see old Jethro behind the grilled ticket window. Then the thin, fox-like features of Red Curville peered at him from the same window, and his greeting died unspoken.

Annoyance twisted Curville's mouth.

"Damn it, Jethro! We don't want McClary toolin' that stage. You know—"

Old Jethro shrugged. "It's him or nothin', Curville. Hank Shrunweiler 'nd Boss Ketcher are both snowed in somewhere over east of Payton. Pike Williams is the only other driver I got here, 'nd he's down with pneumony. McClary's a good man."

Curville snorted. "He's a McClary!"

Lifting anger drove McClary forward a stiff step and then he stopped, working his fingers to keep them from balling into fists. Old Jethro was shaking his head in silent warning. Red Curville's eyes had tightened and turned dark with malevolent anticipation.

Jethro ventured a small smile. "Think you can get through, Jack? Think you could take Pike's run over to Stockville?"

There was more to it, McClary sensed. Pike Williams' stage run had been postponed when the first snows began clogging the upper Pinchot pass. Williams' pneumonia double-checked it. But now, for some reason, Jethro was sending the stage out.

"I can try," McClary said slowly, watching Curville and wondering where he figured in Jethro's sudden decision. "She's whipping up pretty wild. There'll be no return trip, maybe not even a get-through; but if you say take her. . . ."

Jethro turned to Curville, leaving it open. The gale shouldered at the building, sucking and working along the eaves. But it wasn't storm that was stopping the Pinchot County deputy, McClary knew. Not wind nor snow, but the driver—the McClary! Curville scowled and swore bitterly.

The street door whisked open and McClary turned to see Will Furness wiping the sleet-beads from his heavy black mustaches. The Sheriff was bundled in a bearskin coat that hid his badge, but the austerity was in the open, the cold suspicion and contempt as he pointedly ignored McClary's nod.

"Red's told you?" Furness asked Jethro.

"And I've told him," Jethro said. "Jack McClary is the only driver I got left. Whether he wants to tackle it or not is up to him."

Furness shifted his boots, turning to study McClary with cold, ice-blue eyes.

"It's too risky." Red Curville cut in

harshly. "There's fire under all the talk about the McClarys bein' hooked up with the Canyon bunch. We try takin' Hemper out, and with a McClary ridin' the whip—"

"You're a liar, Curville!" McClary ground out. "Most of the gossip is stuff you've started yourself. You're just jealous because Shirley Furness—"

He stopped suddenly, pinching down on his lips. Old Will Furness hadn't turned a hair, but he knew that the Sheriff was hating him as only a father can hate an unworthy suitor of his only daughter. Red Curville moved along the partition and shoved through the gate, grandstanding now to impress old Furness. Still Furness did not move. McClary lifted his fists in readiness.

Curville stopped just out of reach. "Shall I, Will?" he asked the Sheriff. "Give me the nod and I'll smash his skull."

McClary didn't turn, kept his attention on the thin features of the deputy. That dig about Shirley had hit home; Curville might try a sneak punch.

"It's foolish, anyway, Furness," old Jethro soothed. "Why not let them lynch Hemper? That Canyon gang's kilt and robbed enough so's I know how most of these townspeople feel. Why risk your necks tryin' to get through the Pass just for him?" The voice lowered, changed. "That Pass will be hip deep in a couple more hours. You get stranded, you'll freeze. Why take the risk for a blasted outlaw like Hemper? Leave him here and let the town take him."

Still Furness stood silently studying McClary, and McClary felt a tension build and pound under his eyelids. He was being weighed, being measured against the talk that branded the name McClary. There was talk, talk of Jiggs McClary being a Canyon gang man. Talk that old man McClary spent too much money for a never-working range bum. Both had been

gone for over two years now, two years during which only Jethro had helped him try to live down the suspicion that tainted his name. Only it wasn't working out. He was still a McClary and the McClarys were rumored to be a part of the outlaw Canyon gang.

"Get that coach," Furness said suddenly. "We'll get going. And if we don't make it. . . ." He didn't finish, but McClary knew that the unvoiced threat was aimed at him.

"Hell, Furness," old Jethro snapped angrily. "That ain't a fair shake for no man. He's—"

McClary laughed thinly. "Get 'em ready, Mister. We're goin' through."

WIND was a solid wall of pressure that shoved along the open street. Sleet and loose ground snow thicked the daylight to a dim lead-gray haze. McClary huddled in his sheepskin coat and swore mechanically as the six mules hit their collars. It was crazy, this nightmare drive across the Pinchots to Stockville. A man with a featherweight of brains in his head would just settle back and refuse to try it. Jethro wouldn't have blamed him.

Below town the snow deepened where the road hadn't been broken, and he could feel the stage lag. He yelled at the teams, shaking reins already brittle with their coating of ice. The mules leaned into it, shoved by the booming wind, and the stagecoach began picking up speed.

It had been unbelievably easy to whisk the prisoner out of town. Few people had thought getting through Pinchot Pass possible, even fewer had expected the lawmen to try; and so the town loafed and waited, talking about lynching Hemper, whetting their tempers with drink, goading their anticipation.

The road curved around a high stone flank of naked rock and leveled to a long stretch of unmarked white void, half buried in the whirling curtain of wind-

whipped snow. McClary sank lower in his coat, letting the mules pick their way. Within the coach Sheriff Furness and Deputy Red Curville flanked their surly prisoner. Once, when the wind was deflected by the granite wall, McClary could hear their subdued talking.

THEY crossed the log corduroy over Shiver's Creek, and the road lifted to its first switchback. The mules slowed to a pulling walk.

Red Curville thrust back the window curtain and shoved his head out. "Whip them up, damn it, McClary! You tryin' to get us caught up?"

McClary didn't answer. The snow thickened as the temperature fell. Sleet no longer rattled and clung. Now it was flaky, thick-matted, almost feathery; and he couldn't see thirty feet ahead.

Still the road climbed and drifts began laying across the way. He felt more than saw the buck-jumping of the leaders as they fought against the deepening snow. Then they were through and he sawed back on the reins to give them a breather.

He climbed down, stamping his numbed feet, and walked back to the coach door.

"She's drifting fast," he yelled. "We'll never get through the Pass. Want to turn back?"

Furness eyed him without speaking. Red Curville laughed, a thin mocking rasp of sound.

"Afraid, McClary?"

McClary slammed the door with a violence that startled him. Damn! How hatred for a man could burn through a man's blood! He spat into the drift that lay against the slope shoulder and twisted to face into the wind. The snow was coming heavier, boomed by the wind into long horizontal blankets of swirling white. He doubted suddenly whether he could have made the mules face it even if Furness had agreed to turn back.

The coach door slammed. He turned

to see Sheriff Furness standing there.

"Let's go, McClary," Furness yelled. "I'll ride box a spell."

Wordlessly McClary remounted the box and shook out the reins. The mules began plodding ahead, feeling their way now. Furness hunkered down inside his coat, lurching with the shift of the coach, saying nothing. They drove on.

"We won't make it, will we?" Furness asked.

McClary shook his head. "No."

For upward of half a mile Furness made no comment. Then he said, "Why'd you come, then? If you knew we couldn't hack it?"

"I'm a crazy damned McClary, remember?" McClary retorted angrily. "I'm a McClary. That makes me an outlaw, a coward, anything rotten and mean that a man wants to believe. Even you, Furness. You're dead set against my seein' your daughter because I'm a McClary."

Furness didn't answer, and after a time climbed down and got back inside the coach.

He'd cooked it now, McClary knew. He'd thrown his bitterness into Furness' teeth and Furness hadn't liked it. He'd—

The leaders had stopped again. McClary started to climb down, then stopped. A vague, shifting shadow moved back along the inside of the three teams. He made out the figure of a horseman. Then another. A third man rode closer from the outside edge.

"What's ahead?" McClary yelled. "You come through the Pass?"

Something familiar about the nearest figure stopped him. He stiffened reflexively, half raising from the seat.

"Hiya, kid." Jiggs McClary sat grinning at him from six feet away. "Bad day to be out exercising Jethro's mules, ain't it?"

He realized suddenly, seeing Jiggs' amused mockery, and twisted to look back along the coach. A man was on either

side, head and shoulder thrust through the curtain. Blank amazement shook him.

"How'd you—"

Jiggs McClary laughed. "We got ways, kid. That's how come the Canyon bunch is still goin' strong. Ain't nothing happens in town we don't get wind of." He squinted up at the box. "Thanks for delivering Hemper to us. Otherwise, we'd had to ride in to spring him."

Furness and Red Curville were ordered out onto the road. They stood with hands raised. Hemper was hauled out and led away into the roiling haze farther up the road. McClary could feel Furness' scrutiny, but the Sheriff said nothing.

"Come along with us, kid," Jiggs invited. "It's a better go than scramblin' for scraps in town. We live, boy. We live."

McClary didn't answer. Furness was watching him narrowly now, he saw. The lawman's hands were high, his face inscrutable in the thick haze of snow fall. Red Curville began swearing but silenced abruptly as Jiggs turned.

Jiggs McClary became serious, reining over until his mount was tight against the stage's front wheel. There was no grinning on his face. "Come along, kid. You're done if you stay here. We're—" He stopped suddenly, not wanting to bring it into the open.

"What if I don't see it, Jiggs?"

"Hand me your rifle."

"I ain't got a rifle." Irony of it touched his voice, and he added, "The law don't trust me that far."

A man's voice sounded somewhere farther up the road. Jiggs McClary reined away. He lifted his arm in a wave. The mules began moving ahead. But the coach didn't move. McClary reared up on the high seat, yelling. But snow was already blotting them out. The Canyon bunch had cut the traces, stranding the stage coach, killing the three of them as surely as though they'd fired bullets.

Red Curville's figure leaped toward the stage coach, pawed at the door. Then he flung himself away and a gun was in his fingers. He thumbed a quick shot, two more before McClary could warn him. A horse screamed agony. Shots flurried back, and McClary saw Furness stagger and go down. Curville emptied his gun, then whirled crazily and went running back along the road.

Jiggs McClary and three others trotted back to the coach.

"Change your mind, kid," Jiggs pleaded. "Them damned lawdogs are dead. We'll give you a lift into camp afore this thing snows in. Change your mind and you can—"

McClary laughed mirthlessly. "That'd make me a McClary, Jiggs. I been fightin' that for two years."

One of the men beside Jiggs swore and lifted his hand. A gun was in it. Jiggs tried to bat the arm aside. The gun gushed flame that poked into McClary's face, that spread and burned and sucked him into its red-black maw. He toppled.

COLD was knotted in the pit of his stomach when he first became aware of things. His face was wet with snow and somewhere along his ear his heart was beating with numbing, sickening force. He struggled to lift his head and saw that he was still sprawled in the box of the deserted stage coach.

Shakily he climbed down to the road and stood leaning against the thin panel. He was sick. The string was played out. Furness dead, Red Curville wandering blindly along the mountain road. An hour, two hours. . . . He raised his voice in sudden wild yelling, "Jiggs, damn you! You McClary! You murderin' damned McClary!"

"Quiet, lad," a voice said almost under his boots. "You askin' that Canyon bunch back?"

McClary twisted sharply, dropping to

his knees. Old Furness lay half under the coach. Dark stain thickened the front of his shirt, but his eyes were open. And he knew the critical extent of his wound. McClary could read that in his eyes.

"They—they took Hemper," McClary said inanely.

Furness tried to shrug but the movement caused him pain. He subsided, fighting the breath in and out of his lungs. Curville came back. McClary didn't notice him until he straightened to peer into the storm. And then Curville was there.

"Damn you, McClary!" Curville raged. "You got us into this! It's your fault!" The deputy raised the gun, then let it sag. He twisted to peer at the storm-choked mountains. "What'll we do?"

Afraid, McClary thought contemptuously. He's afraid of being left out here alone or he'd shoot me dead.

He shrugged. "Nothin' we can do. This snow'll be over our heads afore morning. Furness can't last more than an hour unless we can get him—"

He lifted his head, trying to make out some landmark of the mountain road.

"You know where we are?" he asked Curville.

The deputy shook his head. "Maybe three-four miles from Henderson's Crossing. Probably above Butch Fenton's place. But what—"

McClary closed his eyes, trying desperately to catch the image of this stretch of mountain road. Loose shale slope below, sheer rock for five hundred yards above, then stunted cedar and naked crag.

"Ever ride a toboggan?" he asked suddenly, almost light-headed with the scheme that touched him. "Ever ride down a shale slope a thousand miles an hour?"

Curville stared nervously.

McClary dropped to his knees. Old Furness was still conscious, mouth bracketed by thin white furrows of pain.

"Hang on, Furness," McClary pleaded.

"I'm probably going to kill you, but you're a read duck anyway if we stay here."

Curville swore and lifted his gun again. "No you ain't, McClary!"

Furness rolled his eyes. "Drop it, Curville. Your damned fool stunt got us shot in the first place. They'd 'a left us alone if you hadn't tried—"

Curville didn't answer. McClary eyed the coach and then moved away to peer at the steep slope on the off-side of the stage road. The coach was big, far too heavy for a man to move should it upset. And even then . . . he tried not to think of what might happen.

For upward of thirty minutes he sawed at the heavy three-inch leather thorough-braces. Curville helped, not understanding the thing even after McClary had explained it. The rounded bottom of the coach would slide down a slope steep enough. With iced snow to glaze the way. . . .

They untapped the wheels and levered them off. The heavy coach sagged, creaked as stresses grew and balance shifted, then slowly slid down to the snow.

McClary forced his numbing hands, lacing one wheel to the back of the coach, leaving just the wide rim and some three spokes above the top. Breaking out the gear, he got an ax and hacked at the running-gear tongue until it lay free. Thrust up through the opening between the spokes, the tongue made a crude makeshift rudder.

"Now we try," McClary said finally. "Maybe we can get down to Fenton's ranch in one piece."

The full enormity of the hazard caught Curville then. He backed away, voice hollow with fear.

"Not me, McClary. You can't see ten feet in this storm. You'd shoot us off a cliff, or—"

"Put me in, McClary," old Furness whispered. "I'm freezing to death here.

Your way'll make it quicker, whatever happens."

McClary grinned at the crusty old lawman. Fear was a thing Furness didn't know. He dragged the old man inside and stretched him on the floor.

Curville swore and minced around, afraid to try it, afraid to stay behind. He helped as McClary levered the rig to the slanted lip of the road. Snow was a thick, blinding curtain. What lay ahead—McClary bit his lip and tried not to think.

"I—I think I'll go," Curville whimpered. "But I—"

McClary felt the stage shift. He levered again, thrusting his full weight against the makeshift fulcrum. The coach shifted more, began tilting, started moving.

Leaping against the wheel lashed to the rear boot, McClary felt his added weight give the coach momentum. Slowly, almost ponderously, the coach began to slip. Then faster . . . faster. . . .

Feet braced, he tried to hold the jouncing bucking wagon tongue hard against the ground . . . tried to rudder the awkward, top-heavy coach into straight sliding. Wind cut at his eyes until tears blinded him. A wild, eerie roaring built up. Red Curville whimpered and McClary roared at him to lie down.

Faster, faster, until the coach seemed to be falling free and only the snow-fogged wind held them in. A boulder lifted one side of the coach and they flew precariously tilted. He flung himself against the rudder. The coach slewed, settled back, and he tried to peer ahead.

There was no seeing nor steering, now. He had thought there would be remote chance of winning through, but now. . . . Stubby cedars began whipping past, blurred and shadowy in the flying murk. The coach bucked, slammed hard against a cedar and whirled crazily sideways for fifty yards before the rudder again straightened it out.

(Continued on page 127)

HELL-RIM ROUNDUP

By LEWIS B. PATTEN



All of a sudden Steve sends his loop sailin'...

A rope is an honest man's life, a rustler's death—and a fast man's final judge. The kid measured his for all three—and found it just hangin' size!

I'VE GOT a little layout over on the other side of the desert, about fifty miles back in a little sheltered canyon, but the winters are pretty tough up there and I don't always have enough hay. I got to figuring that if I could find a good man to ramrod the outfit, I might buy Doc Peacock's place down on the desert and drive my cattle there to winter them every fall.

I talked some to Doc about it before roundup, but I kind of hated to close any deals, because I didn't know of anybody I could trust to run the outfit like I would. Doc has got to sell because he's sick and wants to go East. He couldn't even make it to the roundup this year.

Some of my stuff always drifts down on the desert, so whenever they have a roundup there, I have to go along. I

furnish a wagon, a cook and myself and everybody seems satisfied. Then when it's over, I hire two-three men for a couple of weeks to take the strays home.

Well, we've got a bunch of mixed stuff gathered up, waitin' to be cut for brands, and about all of the hands are up in the badlands north of here, combing them for strays. Most of the work is done and this bunch we're holding is a big one.

Doc Peacock has only got one man with this bunch, a kid of maybe twenty-two or three. The thing I've noticed most so far about this kid is the jaw on him. If I ever seen a stubborn one, he has it.

Along about two-three o'clock in the afternoon, a couple of gents ride up, one of them a barrelchested, shaggy looking cowman and the other a fancied-up dude from town. It's pretty dry, and dust has turned the dude's black broadcloth suit to a dingy gray.

They speak their piece to me and I ride out to Doc's puncher, Steve Colburn. I say, "I'll take your place for a while, Steve. There's a couple of jaspers over at the wagon looking for Doc Peacock's ramrod."

He asks, "Did you tell 'em what happened?"

I nod. Doc's ramrod, Jake Fallon, is dead. One of the wagons left this morning with his body. His saddle girth broke yesterday when he had a loop on a big ringy steer and he got his neck broke before any of us could interfere. I tell Steve, "They say they got to talk to somebody that works for Doc."

Steve grunts. It's plain he just considers himself a cowhand and not hired to rep for his boss, but he lifts his bronc into a running walk and rides over to the wagon.

They parlay for a few minutes, and the dude waves a paper in Steve's face which he finally snatches and reads. I ain't too far away to see that the big cowman is nervous. He keeps slipping cartridges out

of his belt, tossing them in the air, shoving them back in the loops. His horse is sweated and played out.

The other one, the dude, is pale and tired looking and he keeps shifting in his saddle like there was cactus between him and it.

Steve hands the paper back and rides out to me. He's pretty mad. I ask, "What's the matter?"

"Why, they got a bill of sale from Doc for five hundred three year old steers. They want me to cut 'em out."

"What's wrong with that?"

He says, puzzled like, "Damned if I know. Maybe nothin'. I just don't want to take it on myself. I told 'em to wait 'till the rest of the hands got back. They called me a wet-eared kid an' I blew up."

Before I can say anything more he mumbles, "It's kind of funny, though, that them jaspers would pay thirty-five for steers sight-unseen that they can buy for thirty most anywhere. An' the bill of sale calls for five hundred an' we can't scrape together over three hundred. You know Doc. He talks big about how many cattle he's got, but it don't look like he'd sell more than he had."

I shake my head and ask, "Strangers around here, ain't they?"

"Yeah. The dude calls hisself Vance Lyman. The other one's Jeff Reboza. What would you do, Bill?"

This kid ain't never had to decide anything before except maybe whether or not to take a certain job, whether or not to go to a dance, and he don't like having this shoved at him. I feel kind of sorry for him. I say, "Tell 'em to go to hell. Make 'em wait 'till the other hands get back."

He grunts, "Mebbe you're right. But if these jaspers go back to Doc and squawk, he'll fire me sure. Winter's coming on an' jobs will be hard to find." The muscles along his jaw tighten up and he spurs viciously after a couple of steers

with a strong urge to quit the bunch. The big cowman is riding out through the bunch, reading brands, trying to get a rough count, but he ain't making much headway because nobody is helping him. You can see his temper getting short in the way he handles his horse.

I notice the way he wears his gun, which is an old Army model Colt with a sawed-off barrel, that's been converted to use .44 cartridges; also the way the holster's worn and the way the grips are shiny from a lot of handling. I figure he's a pretty good gent to stay away from.

A bunch of punchers ride out from the wagon and one of 'em relieves Steve. I ride in to eat, with Steve not far behind, wearing a worried frown. I'd like to help this kid, but there ain't much I can do. I can't speak for Doc Peacock, one way or the other.

This dude, Vance Lyman, slouches over to me, gives me an oily kind of grin an' says, "You look to me like a fellow that knows what's right. We rode fifty miles today and we're pretty tired." He flashes the bill of sale in my face. I look at it.

One thing I'm sure of as quick as I do. It ain't Doc's signature at the bottom. It looks a lot like it, but hanging around Doc's office dickering on this ranch, I've seen him sign his name a dozen times. He does it with a flourish, and fast. This signature has been written slow, because the lines are just a little bit shaky.

I look sharp at Lyman for a second before I get hold of myself, and I can see I've given myself away. He says, "Easy, friend. Don't do anything you're going to regret." He sticks his hand in his coat pocket and it don't take no mastermind to see he's holding onto a derringer. I know if I open my mouth an' say what I was figuring on saying, I'm a dead man.

So instead I growl, "Look, mister, I know Doc, but I don't work for him and I ain't reppin' for him on roundup. Take your troubles somewhere else."

The big cowman steps up behind me an' says, real soft, "Trouble, Vance?"

I begin to get mad now, but not mad enough to go for my gun with that jasper behind me. But I know now this is a skin game, and I make up my mind that they ain't going to get away with it.

Vance says, "Not yet, Jeff. Not yet." He gives me a long, hard stare. I decide right then that this Vance is the bad one of the two, even if his seat is sore from the fifty mile ride he's talking about.

He saunters over to Steve, who's hunkering in the shade of the wagon, eating. I follow and Jeff stays behind me. Vance says, "Listen kid. We got a bill of sale for some steers. We got a crew that'll be here about dark. We want 'em cut and ready to move by then."

Steve rears up and says, "Doc's tally is three hundred an' seventeen three-year-old steers, four hundred an' eleven twos, an' two hundred an' eighty-seven yearlin's. I can't give you five hundred threes even if I wanted to, which I don't."

MY EYES bug out. Steve hasn't looked to me like a kid that took that much interest in the boss' count. I decide I'll watch him a little closer. Steve is small, but wiry and tough. Right now that long jaw of his is set and hard.

Vance says, "All right then, damn it. Give us the rest in twos. I thought Doc was supposed to be an honest man. We paid our money and we want our steers, even if they ain't all threes."

I don't know whether Steve is wise to these jiggers or not. I kind of hope not, in a way, but he'd be awful dumb if he wasn't. Two-year-old steers ain't worth near what the threes are, and these jaspers have paid too much even if they got all threes. I think of getting Steve alone and tipping him off, but I know that'd be foolish. He'd just get himself killed, makin' a play against these two.

What he says surprises me. He says, "All right. We'll start cuttin' 'em out." I sure do feel disappointed in Steve then. He hasn't caught on that this is a steal. He's likely feeling pretty proud of himself for getting rid of a lot of two-year-olds at the three-year-old price.

I start off to drop a word to the other hands that are pretty well scattered, but Jeff Reboza steps up beside me an' says, "You stick around, Grandpa. We'll need your help."

The bunch of us could handle these jaspers easy enough, but nobody knows what they are but me.

Steve puts his plate in the wreck pan and swings aboard his bronc. He says, curt like, "All right. Let's go."

Jeff Reboza stays close to me, but he's relyin' on his speed with that Colt an' he takes down his rope, as I do.

Steve starts cuttin'. It's pretty to watch him work, an' it's especially pretty to watch his horse work.

Vance has to step to stay beside Steve, or close enough for the derringer to work. Several times he gets in the way. I catch Steve lookin' at me several times, but his face is deadpan. I'm chousing out the ones Steve cuts, shoving them down a draw where they can be picked up later. Jeff Reboza is helping me. I keep watching for a chance to pull my gun an' throw down on Jeff, but he don't give me no chance. He's watching me first an' the cattle second.

A big old roan steer takes a swipe at my pony with his horns. I duck away all right, but then he takes a notion to break out of the bunch. I'm riding fast, trying to head him so he'll go in the right direction, but he's fast as a deer and I'm not gaining. Reboza is about twenty yards behind me.

All of a sudden I glance back at Steve. He's quartering in to head the steer on a dead run. He's caught Vance flatfooted, an' Vance is too far behind for the der-

ringer to be any good. I think about yelling to Steve that this is a steal and to look out, but he's well within range of Reboza's gun and so am I, so I don't.

Steve's got his loop swinging and I know he's going to bust that steer, but just as he gets set to throw, he changes direction like a flash and the loop sails out neat as you please an' settles over Reboza.

I feel like yelling. Steve ain't so dumb.

It ain't over yet though. Reboza's gun is out and he's bringin' it up, but just then Steve's pony sets his feet in a slidin' stop. The loop tightens an' Reboza sails out of the saddle.

I've forgotten all about the steer we was chasin'. I turn to face Vance, who's coming up fast now. But the poor fool ain't got nothing but that short-barreled derringer. He's shooting at me, but it don't worry me especially. I slip my Colt out of the holster an' take careful aim before I fire. Vance drops his gun an' graps for his shoulder, which is smashed.

Steve lets Reboza get to his feet, an' with the rope still on him, rides for the wagon. I herd Vance along behind. The boys are riding in now to find out what the shooting is all about. I see a big cloud of dust rising not far away, and I know there ain't going to be time to explain before those hardcases of Vance's get here.

Steve shoves Reboza into the wagon an' Vance right after him. Then he crawls in behind them with his gun in his hand. He says, "If you guys yelp you'll be sorry."

The first five or six of the hands are clustered about the back of the wagon now, all askin' questions at once. Steve tells 'em to wait a minute an' says to me, "Ride out an' tell 'em Vance sent you. Tell 'em their cattle are down in the draw an' that Vance wants 'em to get busy an' bunch them steers."

I nod and spur my horse away. Vance's

(Continued on page 125)

RECORD



RODEO

By Joey Sasso

WE VALUE your opinions on these record sessions, fans, and we'd very much like to hear from you. Sound off, and you may be a prizewinner. For the best letter discussing the reviews in each issue, the writer will receive, absolutely free, one of the best new albums of Western music. The writers of the two next best letters will each find in the mail, with our compliments, one of the latest Western releases. Address your letter to Joey Sasso, care of this magazine, at 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

HOWDY once again, record fans! As you have noticed, no doubt, all the major studios have turned to the West as a source of music on wax, and those of us who've known all along that the guitar and fiddle music of the plains and prairies was wonderful stuff are entitled to a good loud I-told-you so. The boom in Western music continues unabated. Let's look some of it over.

BABY SITTER'S BLUES
IT ISN'T ANY WONDER THAT I LOVE YOU
ANN JONES
(Capitol)

Capitol's second record featuring this sensational Western girl singer. The topside is a delightful novelty Western-style number with a yodel finish. The reverse is a beautiful Western romantic ballad.

WHY DON'T YOU HAUL OFF AND LOVE ME?
AFRAID
KEN MARVIN
(Capitol)

The new cowboy sensation, Ken Marvin,

debuts with two smash numbers, both already receiving acclaim. The first side is Ken's humorous and direct invitation to romance, while the reverse is an appealing sentimental ballad. Marvin's great style, plus two hits back to back, make this a truly outstanding record.

BLUES STAY AWAY FROM ME
PHILOSOPHY
MERLE TRAVIS, EDDIE KIRK, TENNESSEE ERNIE AND CLIFFIE STONE'S BAND
(Capitol)

A Capitol "Four Star" feature. Top talent teamed for performance plus. Different and good. Novelty with humorous vein. Trio featured with good material.

BEYOND THE SUNSET
THE FUNERAL
LUKE THE DRIFTER
(M-G-M)

MGM Records take pride in introducing a great folk artist with this release; someone you might call a country bard. He goes under the name of Luke the Drifter, a name you'll find is an appropriate one.

(Continued on page 128)

In the flaming hell of his final gunfight he learned a killer's strangest lesson—the slow die sudden . . . but the quick die hard!

BLIND BULLET

By RAY GAULDEN



In a second both of them had their guns out. . . .

“JESS, there's somebody coming.”

Old Jess Durant, busy unpacking a case of canned tomatoes, stopped and tipped his head, listening to the faint murmur of hoofs. Then he straightened and looked at his brother, Earl, standing in the doorway.

“Maybe it's him, Earl,” Jess said. “Maybe this time it really is.”

Earl shook his head. “Most likely just some saddle tramp.”

Moving out from behind the counter, Jess wiped his hands on his old flour sack apron. “He'll come one of these days, Earl. I know he will.”

There was a sour expression on Earl's face. “You been waiting a long time and he ain't showed up yet.”

Jess came to the doorway and stood beside his brother, looking along the trail that wound like a piece of old brown ribbon across the prairie. He squinted his faded eyes against the sun glare and saw a rider, slouched in the saddle of a lemon-colored horse, coming slowly toward them.

"I got a feeling it just might be him, Earl."

"You've had that feeling before, Jess, so I wouldn't get too worked up." Earl put his hand to his mouth, stifling a yawn. "Anyway, I'm going to take a nap. This cussed heat is getting me down."

Turning back into the store, Earl walked slowly across the room toward the living quarters at the rear.

A big black cat came up and rubbed against Jess Durant's leg, purring softly, but the storekeeper kept his eyes on the approaching rider, and the hope that had been stirring in Durant grew brighter as the man pulled up in front of the doorway, sat loosely in the saddle while he stared at the crudely lettered sign across the sun-blistered front of the place. The fellow was young, about twenty, Jess judged, and he looked tired and the dust was thick upon his shoulders.

Jess Durant felt his heart begin to beat a little faster. "You look kind of familiar," he said.

The stranger took his eyes off the sign and put them on Durant. "My name's Harmon," he said. "Bill Harmon."

Durant searched the stranger's face. "You're King Harmon's son?"

"That's right. Are you Durant?"

Jess's breath made a thin, sharp sound in the stillness. "Yes, I'm Jess Durant," he said. "Come on in out of the heat."

The store smelled of onions and kerosene and tobacco and Jess saw Bill Harmon wrinkle his nose a little as he stepped inside. There was a card table in the middle of the room, an empty quart bottle in the center of it. Durant sat down and

motioned toward a chair across from him.

Harmon shoved his hat back and Durant could see the little streak of sweat across his forehead. He dropped onto the chair and looked at Durant searchingly. "You can tell me something about my dad?"

Durant nodded, his eyes thoughtful. "I didn't know your father, but he stopped here at my place one night. That was a long time ago—must have been better than a year."

Harmon's face was sober. "Dad wrote a letter from Dodge City, saying he had paid off the crew he hired to make the drive, that he had sold the cattle for a good price and was heading home. But he never got back to the Nueces."

Durant shifted his weight in the chair. "How did you find out about my store?"

"A month ago a fellow came down the trail looking for a job. We didn't need any hands because it's been pretty tough going since dad left. But I put this fellow up, and when he heard my name, he told me about your place, how he had stopped by here and had a few drinks. He said you told him a man by the name of Harmon had been killed here."

Durant put his elbows on the table. "I've talked with a lot of fellas that stopped by here, hoping that sometime they might meet up with somebody that knew your father. I went through his pockets that night, but couldn't find a thing that would tell me where he came from."

A faraway look came into Durant's eyes. "It was one night right after dark. Stopped by here with another fella he said he had met up with along the trail. I recognized this other fella. His name was Torbin, a bad one, wanted in Oklahoma for murder."

Harmon frowned. "I can't figure dad taking up with a man like that."

"Well, your father had been drinking a little, and this Torbin put on a good act;

friendly as could be. They started a poker game, intending to spend the night here. While they were playing, your father let it drop that he was carrying ten thousand dollars on him—money he'd got for the sale of his cows."

"And Torbin killed him to get the money?"

Slowly Durant nodded. "I don't know how it started, but they got into an argument and the first thing I knew, both of them had their guns out. Torbin was the fastest."

Bitterness was etched on Harmon's lips. "So Torbin killed him and got away with the money?"

Durant shook his head. "I guess that's what he had in mind, but I grabbed my gun and threw down on him. He was trailing blood when he ran out of here and I reckon he crawled off and died somewhere."

"And the money?"

Pushing his chair back, Durant got to his feet. "I've got the money," he said.

He went into the living quarters and when he came back he handed Harmon a moneybelt. "It's all there," he said.

The belt was heavy. Harmon held it in his hands and looked at it. "I never expected to see this," he said.

Durant's throat felt tight and dry. A small silence built up and then Harmon said, "You buried him here?"

"On a little hill back of the store. I'll show you the way."

There was a path leading up the hill and Durant led the way. The grave was covered with boulders and there were no weeds growing near.

With his hat in his hand, Harmon stood beside the rocky mound and his face was solemn. Durant remained at a distance, leaving the youth alone with his thoughts.

The sun was going down when they returned to the store. Wearily, Durant sank down in the doorway. "You ready to go back now?" he asked.

His face serious, Harmon nodded. He put his hand on the money belt about his waist. "I feel like part of this belongs to you," he said. "You could have told me Torbin got away with it, or if you had kept quiet in the first place, I never would have known what happened here."

"I might have kept still," Durant said. "But I couldn't have gone on living with myself. I don't want a dime of that money, son."

Harmon turned toward his horse and stepped into the saddle. "Well, good-by," he said. "And thanks, mister."

"So long, young fella."

Rising, Durant stood in the doorway and watched Bill Harmon ride away. Then Earl Durant came out of the back room and moved slowly up beside his brother.

"Has he gone, Jess?"

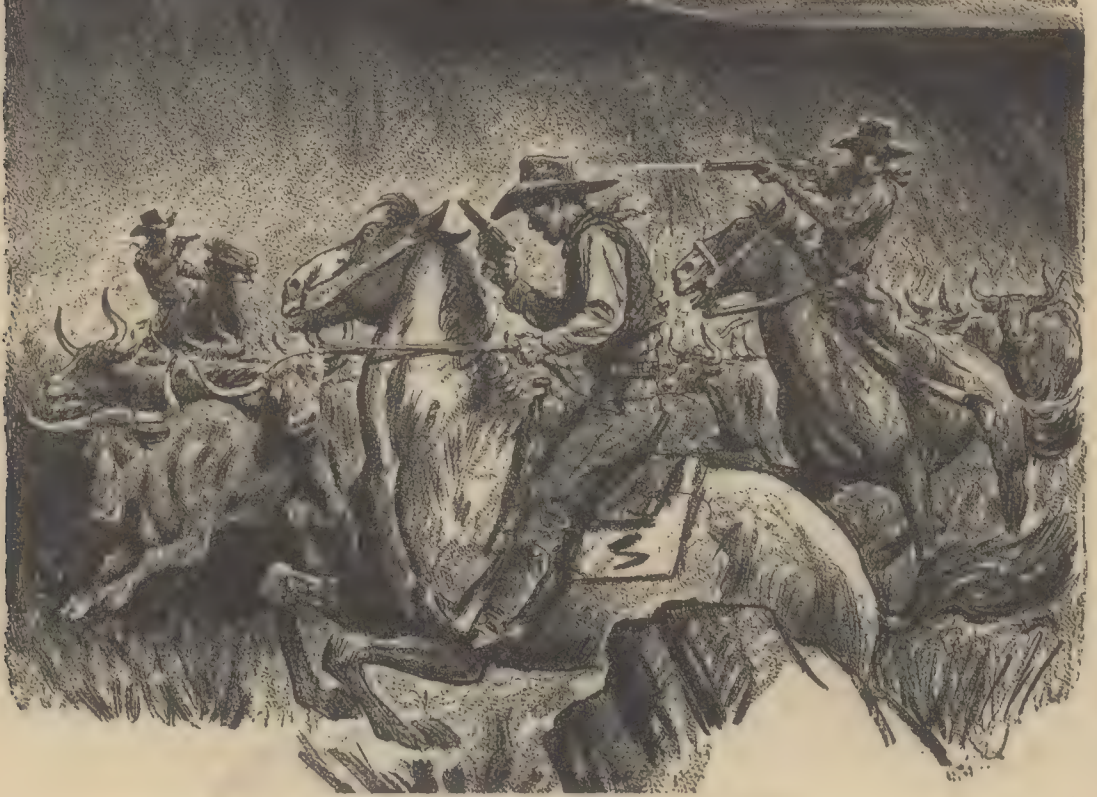
"Yes, he's gone."

"And the money's gone with him." Earl's mouth was thin with bitterness. "I hope you're satisfied now. I hope you'll quit talking about it. But why didn't you do it up brown? Why didn't you tell him there wasn't any Torbin?"

Jess Durant's eyes remained on Harmon, watching him grow smaller and smaller. He said, "I couldn't do that, Earl, no more than I could bring myself to turn you over to the law the night you killed his father."

Earl Durant said no more. He looked old and tired as he stood there in the doorway with his face turned toward the mountains, rising high in the distance. The sinking sun threw red and gold banners across the sky, but Jess Durant knew his brother could not see the beauty in that sunset. His punishment had been far worse than the quick darkness that came on the end of a hangrope. The last thing Earl Durant had seen was the searing red-orange flash at the muzzle of King Harmon's gun, just a split second before Harmon's bullet had blinded him.

They rode into the point, firing
as they came. . . .



Living right is a lot harder than dying right, Orcott found, for to him it meant betting his guns with the other side of the law—and fighting to death for the things he hated most!

TURNBACK TRAIL

By GIFF CHESHIRE

HE SAT in a bloody ooze. The horse was spent but still going. It had been luckier, escaping the slugs. But the hot, waterless roughs had told on it. It dragged on stubbornly, seeming to share Rand's aversion to dying in this place. It tried to nicker, but managed only to flick its ears. Rand felt a weak interest in what it had sensed. Instinct made him pull his gun and keep it

in his hand. It seemed unbearably heavy.

He put his attention on the route ahead. The horse picked along a tumbled canyon. The floor showed game tracks, and he thought the country opened just ahead. He thought of water, and thirst flamed in his throat.

He quirted the horse. Then he heard another nicker plainly. In a moment they came down on the lip of a cutbank. There

was a roan saddler below, with its cinch loose and reins trailed. Beyond was a creek. Rand couldn't see anyone, but somebody might have bushed up. He drove his horse down the bank, not caring. Nothing happened.

He fell out of the saddle and crawled into the water. He buried his face and drank, and that was the last he knew.

When he came to he was staring into the worried face of a teen-age boy. He felt sandy gravel under him. He was soaked but it hadn't cooled him. His hit shoulder was still a live coal. The kid had pulled him to where a boulder shaded him. Rand saw a creel and fish pole. The kid's levis were rolled high on brown thighs. The legs were wet, the ankles plastered with sand.

"What happened to you?" the boy asked.

Rand turned that in his mind. He hadn't expected this and had prepared no answer. "Geologist," he gasped. "Making a field trip through the badlands. Some men jumped me." It came out easily.

"You strayed too close to some owl-hooters," the boy said promptly. "The back country's full of 'em. What were you after?"

"Just studying the formations in there." He felt eased. He knew something about the subject, and that would be easy to stick to. Once he had really had an interest in such things.

"I got a bandage on your shoulder. Could you ride again? Sometimes we don't have it so peaceable. A man named Hunsaker sees to that. But you're welcome at our spread."

Rand thought that over. He had crossed the brakes. He must have shaken loose the posse. There were hundreds of places where a man could come out. It might be all right. It was at least better than dying alone in the malpais.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Jimmy Kerby. Yours, mister?"

"Rand Orcott." He realized he had given his real name. But that didn't matter. The people back yonder knew only what he looked like and what he had tried to do. "Is your outfit big?"

Jimmy shook his head. "We're greasy-sackers, me and Sis. Dad was killed last year. He got set down on the range without a gun, and a ringy bull cornered him. Want to try and get up?"

Rand tried, and it all went black again.

The next time there was a sheet and mattress under him. There was a girl beside the bed. "No doctor!" he mumbled. "I don't need one—" He had been thinking about that before he blacked out the last time. It came mechanically.

Her voice was low, sweet. "I fixed you up myself. I'm Mary Kerby. Jimmy managed to get you here." She was dark and slim and very pretty.

The fear went out of Rand. Doctors had to report gunshot wounds to the law.

Mary smiled and added, "Could you eat something now? You ought to."

"I'll try. I thank you and Jimmy from the bottom of my heart."

"Plain decency requires no thanks, Mister Orcott." She went out.

It was something in her voice or eyes. Rand knew she suspected him, had given him to understand the impersonal basis on which they had helped him. He lay with fear coming up in him again. His shoulder was sore, but he had been able to use it all along. His main trouble was exhaustion from the shock and loss of blood and the hard drive through the badlands. *Don't let them send for the law. Give me time to get up and going again. . . .*

He hadn't hurt anybody. To see to that, he had gone into the dinky, adobe-housed bank with an empty gun. It had blown up. The teller had pretended to be deaf, stalling. Someone had shot from hiding and missed narrowly. Rand had run, taking a slug in his shoulder while getting out

of town. He'd spent the better part of a day shaking a posse. The bank people had had experience, and it was his first. Yet he was oddly glad he had failed. He saw himself clearly for the first time in years, a tin-bill gambler bucking a streak of bad luck, trying a fool thing at the last for a new stake.

A horse clattered into the yard. Sweat climbed on Rand's skin. Far off he heard Mary exclaim, "Oh, Fred—what now?" He couldn't make out the answer. He shoved onto his elbows, seeking his gun. A spasm of pain flattened him. He lay waiting, watching the door with unblinking eyes.

A gun fired in the distance. It was answered from within the house. He thought in amazement, *Are they fighting for me?* Then he remembered the neighborhood quarrel Jimmy had mentioned. There was no more shooting.

Yet he jerked tight again when a man came into the bedroom, closing the door carefully behind him. He was young, tall and plain-featured. There was blunt study in his eyes as he came across the room.

He said flatly, "Orcott, you're on the dodge."

Rand met his eyes. "And in rotten shape for it."

"I'm Fred Wilson. The Kerbys' neighbor on the north. Aim to make it more, if Mary's ever willing. Wanted a look at you. Wanted you to know I won't take it kindly if they have reason to be sorry for this."

"Why, blast you!" Rand exploded. Then abruptly he said, "I don't blame you," and got another good look at himself.

"Now, they ain't sent for the sheriff," Wilson resumed, "and won't unless they have to. Here in the back country we have to get along with all kinds of people."

To cover his tremendous relief, Rand grinned. "A moment ago it sounded like

you weren't getting along with somebody."

"That was some boys from Big H, Clyde Hunsaker's tough outfit! I beat him out on a good government lease and made him sore. He's been out to get me ever since. Couple of his punchers caught me out without my gun. Knew they'd try to beat me up, and the closest place I could head was here. They threw a shot for the devil of it." Wilson grimaced. "There's been something like that ever since the grass ruckus."

Mary came in then with a tray. It held soup and hot biscuits. Rand regarded her thoughtfully. An exchange of bullets hadn't been enough to throw her off stride. He thought, *This Wilson's a good man. I wonder how she feels about him.*

When she went out, Wilson said, "Hunsaker's potting at the Kerbys, too. Partly because they're friends of mine. Partly because he'd like to see 'em starve out so he could grab off their range."

"If he got wise that they're helping an outlaw, they'd be in for it, wouldn't they?"

"That's right," Wilson said. He turned. Even his back looked tired.

RAND was up the next day, but without strength to do more than rest around the ranch house. Jimmy was doing most of the outwork, and except for a few hours each day, thereafter, Mary was home. To Rand's surprise she was easy, relaxed, busying herself without keeping any special watch on him.

At last he said, "You know I got hurt running from the law, but you aren't afraid of me. Why?"

She was idle at the moment, seated in the big living room with him and knitting. She looked at him quickly. "Maybe I have an unfair advantage. You talked quite a little while you were out of your head. I gathered that you have a good

background, that you came West for adventure and took the easy, exciting way of living out here."

He eyed her carefully. "What else did you gather?"

"That you were broke and finally hungry enough to rob a bank. You failed but got hurt. I'm sorry, but you told me yourself, I was nursing you, and you seemed to think me some woman out of your past life. Your mother or sister, maybe?"

He shrugged.

At the end of a week Rand was able to saddle and ride out with Jimmy. He wanted to condition himself, and then he would go on. It was broken country, the bunchgrass turned dry and yellow. The Kerbys, he learned, ran a couple of hundred steers. Rand didn't have to be told it was a starvation setup. His admiration for their uncomplaining fortitude was boundless.

They had climbed a bench and progressed into the high country when they came upon Fred Wilson. There were two riderless horses, with Wilson dismounted. Rand's nape tightened when he saw the figure on the ground. It was a man who seemed recently to have clawed and kicked the parched earth. His blood ran out from under him.

"Haber!" Jimmy breathed. He glanced worriedly at Rand. "He was a Big H rider. One of the pair that chased Fred home the other day."

"And," Wilson said wearily, "my line runs right along behind you, there. It just happens I seen you two coming from the bench yonder. I was coming down to meet you when I seen him. Jimmy, it looks like this rips the bone out."

"Why?" Rand asked.

"Why?" Wilson eyed him in detachment. "Because Hunsaker's killed one of his own riders on my line. He's capable of that. It's an old trick. They'll pretend to find him here and claim I killed him be-

cause of the trouble the other day. And have grounds to wipe me out."

"Then why let them find him here?" Rand asked.

"Do no good to move him."

"I see you caught his horse. Tie him on and start it home. Cover that blood, and they can't claim he was killed anyplace in particular."

Wilson grinned. "It's worth trying."

They did it. Thereafter Wilson rode with them a distance, then peeled off for home. Rand was deeply worried, both for Wilson and himself. With his frame-up spoiled, Hunsaker might decide to send for the sheriff and try to incriminate Wilson on more planted evidence. Moreover, if the officer discovered a wounded stranger was in the vicinity, it would be over except for the trail by jury. The Kerbys and Wilson would be involved in that as well. So far the three were the only ones who knew he was in the country. He had to clear out at once.

They were close to the Kerby place when Jimmy said, "You look tuckered, Rand. Best go on in. There's a little bunch of steers I want to look at down on the bottom. I won't be long."

Rand assented and rode on alone. His own horse had been pastured but would be in shape to travel again. But bringing it in would rouse suspicion, and he didn't want them to know he was leaving. They would guess why and figure he was still too weak and object to it. But it was a good horse, a fair enough swap to leave them, so he would have to take one of theirs. He knew he would have to see Mary first, for the thought of never doing so again was a dragging emptiness in his mind and heart.

He found her busy, starting supper. She smiled when he stepped into the kitchen, saying, "It's good to see color in your cheeks, Rand."

It was the second time her eyes had spoken to him, the first time saying that

she knew about him, saying now that she found pleasure in his return. He thought. *Not yet, but in time it could be.* Or could have been. The bleak way the tense corrected itself sent a jar of pain through him. He walked swiftly into the other room where he pretended to rest.

Jimmy had not come in by the time Mary had supper ready. After waiting an hour, she suggested that she and Rand go ahead and eat. Then, as the light started to fade, she began to show her worry.

"He might have gone down to see Fred again," she commented finally.

It was the opportunity Rand had wanted, and he said, "I'll ride over and see."

Mary dashed his plans when she said quickly, "I'll go with you."

They were halfway to Wilson's when Mary pulled down her horse. Looking off in the direction she was studying, Rand saw dust twisting up. In a moment she said, "That's Jimmy. And riding fast. I wonder—" She broke off, but he saw she was biting her lip.

Jimmy whipped in on a sweating horse. He gasped, "Hunsaker's going right ahead with it, Rand! I got to wondering if he wouldn't and spotted myself where I could watch his end of the graze. They come in from toward Fred's, hazing a big cut of his steers toward Jump-off Creek."

"What does that mean?" Rand asked.

"They aim to get 'em onto the bench and stampede 'em. That's all it could mean."

"Oh, no," Mary breathed.

Rand hadn't wanted to worry her about the dead Haber, but now he had to explain. He concluded by saying, "Are you game to go on by yourself and get Fred?"

Mary's answer was to spur her horse. Jimmy wheeled and rode out the way he had come. Rand caught up, the hard riding setting his shoulder on fire again. Dusk was full now. The long rim ahead

seemed close, its squared walls lifting from the high desert floor and its reach running out in the twilight. Jimmy guided them to a tilted segment that canted off the floor. They swept in below the rim and pulled down. Rand could see the oncoming cattle and presently could hear the jarring scrape of their trotting hoofs.

"What's the answer, Jimmy?" he asked.

"Run at 'em head on."

"And scatter them on the floor?"

Jimmy nodded. "Then ride like the devil. There's four of 'em." He waited a few minutes in silence, then said, "Now."

THEY drove their horses forward. Jimmy fired his carbine above the backs of the oncoming herd, Rand cutting loose with his six-gun. They swung close to the point, then swerved sharply to the right. Rand saw a puncher wheel his horse. He kept on beside Jimmy, both yelling and firing. At any moment the Big H riders would be after them, and Rand was glad a taste for hunting had taught him skill with guns.

Swinging off with Jimmy then coming back, he saw that the shock had wrought its hoped-for panic in the little herd. In a moment the ambling steers were exploding in every direction, well away from the rise to the bench.

"Time to ride, Rand!" Jimmy yelled. "They won't get 'em bunched again tonight!"

Big H didn't even try it. In a moment Rand realized they were in pursuit. A gun spat back there, then more than one. Rand kept beside Jimmy's driving mount. The chase ran for a mile; then gradually Big H fell behind. Not until then did Jimmy slump suddenly and go forward on his horse's neck. Before Rand could reach him, the boy fell. Rand swung back and dismounted, a cold chill running in him. Jimmy lay on his side, crushed against the earth from the hard spill. His carbine was just ahead, where it had

landed. Rand's throat seemed to split in that moment.

Jimmy had taken a slug in the back, but managed to keep going a while. And he still breathed. Something lifted from Rand that was like a prayer of gratitude when he discovered that. Something followed, a black and bitter rage. The first solid, stable purpose of his life, perhaps. He mounted and rode on until he caught Jimmy's horse. He tore up his shirt and got a crude bandage on the boy, who was hit above the left hip bone. He tied him across the saddle, handling him carefully. The boy had given him all the friendship in his heart.

Rand had never been at Wilson's home ranch. By now Mary must have reached there, would be bringing him if she had found him. Rand came back to the trail, leading the grimly burdened horse. Reaction had hit him, the over-demands he had made on his strength taking toll. He was shaking and a raw nausea worked up from his stomach. But he was getting Jimmy to Wilson's and then he was getting a doctor, and there was nothing else in the world that mattered.

Presently he grew aware of distant gunfire. It struck with cold impact that it came from Wilson's. For an instant Rand swayed, at first fearful for Mary, then aware that he had no place to take Jimmy. Below in a saucer he could make out the obscured shapes of trees. It had to be Wilson's place, and it was under attack.

He came down into the saucer at some distance from the fighting. In a clump of brush he halted and worked himself heavily from the saddle. He tied the horses there and made Jimmy as comfortable as possible. He whispered, "You're young and tough, kid. Hold on."

He saw the fight ahead only as a thing he had to get out of his way. He worked in carefully. He came to a small creek, with cottonwoods standing beyond. There

was somebody in there. The obscure hulk of a barn rose off to the left. Someone else was shooting from the hayloft. Presently he knew there was a third man in a bramble thicket off the front of the house. But there were more on the other side.

A gun flash laced across the creek, pointed toward the house. Rand trailed it and fired. He heard a curse rip out. Somebody flung a hasty shot his way. Rand eared back and fired again. A man yelled an inquiry from the barn. Rand wanted to get to the house, and he wanted to do it before they all realized the defenders had got help.

He splashed through the creek. Somebody stabbed a shot as he climbed the far bank. He fired, and a figure rose before him. He fired again, and the man wasn't there. Rand picked the thicket in front of the house, which would be easier to work past than the barn. He slid through the trees. He halted to shove fresh loads into the gun.

Big H was taking it easy, secure in numbers. Rand got at a quarter to the house with the thicket just ahead. A man rushed out of the brambles, trying for the cover of a tree in the yard. Rand dropped him. He swung toward the house, yelling, "Fred! Mary! It's Rand!"

Somebody heard him. The door swung open as he hit the porch. Rand cut through and heard it slam. The room was dark, heavy with powdersmoke. Mary's voice was frantic.

"Where's Jimmy?"

"Hurt, Mary. We've got to stop this. I've got to go for the doctor."

"Bad?"

"Through the side. There's a chance nothing vital's hit. I put on a bandage and left him in the brush back there. How many of them are there?"

"Half a dozen at the start. I'd just got here." Her voice was calmer, a little reassured. The sash was knocked from a window, and she had a rifle in her hand.

"Most of them are working on the back. If I hadn't seen a man drop that I didn't shoot, you would never have got in."

Rand went on to the kitchen, for Big H didn't know it had nobody left in front. Wilson was at a window on the right, and Rand saw he had been covering it and one on the back wall as well. He went to the latter, his boots crunching on shattered glass. Somebody fired at that moment, and he fired back.

Far out an angry voice roared, "Rush 'em, you hang-tail dogs!"

"That's Hunsaker!" Wilson called to Rand. "Mister, for a tenderfoot you done all right."

The attackers had grown cautious, and there was no sign of response to Hunsaker's order. Rand steeled his nerves. Wilson's gun grew quiet, and Mary apparently found nothing to worry about in front. Wilson swore suddenly, the sound blooming with the crack of a gun outdoors. He straightened, took a halting step and crashed to the floor. Rand ran over.

"Hip," Wilson said. His rifle had flung from his hand. He asked for it. When Rand got it, Wilson crawled back to his window and propped himself there.

Rand stared at him, thinking, *That's the man I want to take Mary away from.*

A second thought hit him. Surprise and fast movement had brought him in to the house. Maybe it would work again. He opened the back door and stepped out to the porch. It drew no fire. He shoved shells into his gun, paused with his back to the wall. Then he moved off the porch at a tangent in the direction his friends could not cover.

The barn was on his right, the creek left. No one was shooting at the moment. It meant only that they were repositioning. He saw a man scuttle from the barn to the brush along the creek. He didn't shoot. They would come at the house from this side, which furnished the best

cover and was hardest to defend. But first they would open a diversion, over on Wilson's side.

The thought had scarcely flitted through Rand's mind when it began. Several guns cut loose beyond the house. He saw a man crawl out of the thicket by the creek, bent on gaining the house. Rand brought up his gun deliberately, chopped down and fired. The crawling man's rump arched in the air, then collapsed. Two guns that had covered him blazed at Rand, who had shoved to the side. He fired twice more.

Surprise and movement, he thought and made a run for the cistern. A slug whined off the stone. Rand thought he knew where the shooter was, and he fired.

Hunsaker's voice bawled again, "They're too tricky! Come on, you sons, let's get 'em!"

THEY came from the dark recesses of the yard, three men now, firing as they ran. Rand made a shot and heard the spat of Wilson's rifle. He stood with spread legs now, emptying his gun. Once a slug warmed his ear, but he saw figures toppling. In a moment the quiet made a strange sensation in his ears.

Dizzy with the rampant will and fury, Rand called, "Fred! You and Mary willing to let me come in a second time?"

He heard Wilson's laugh.

The kitchen lamp was broken, but Wilson told him to bring another from the bedroom. Rand had prowled the ranchyard to make sure it was finished. Among them they had ripped a big piece out of Big H's hide, and the rest apparently had slunk away in defeat. But Hunsaker was dead, which attended to one matter Rand wanted settled before he left.

Now he went down and brought Jimmy in. The boy was drained white but he had regained consciousness. He didn't say anything, and Rand put him on Wilson's bed.

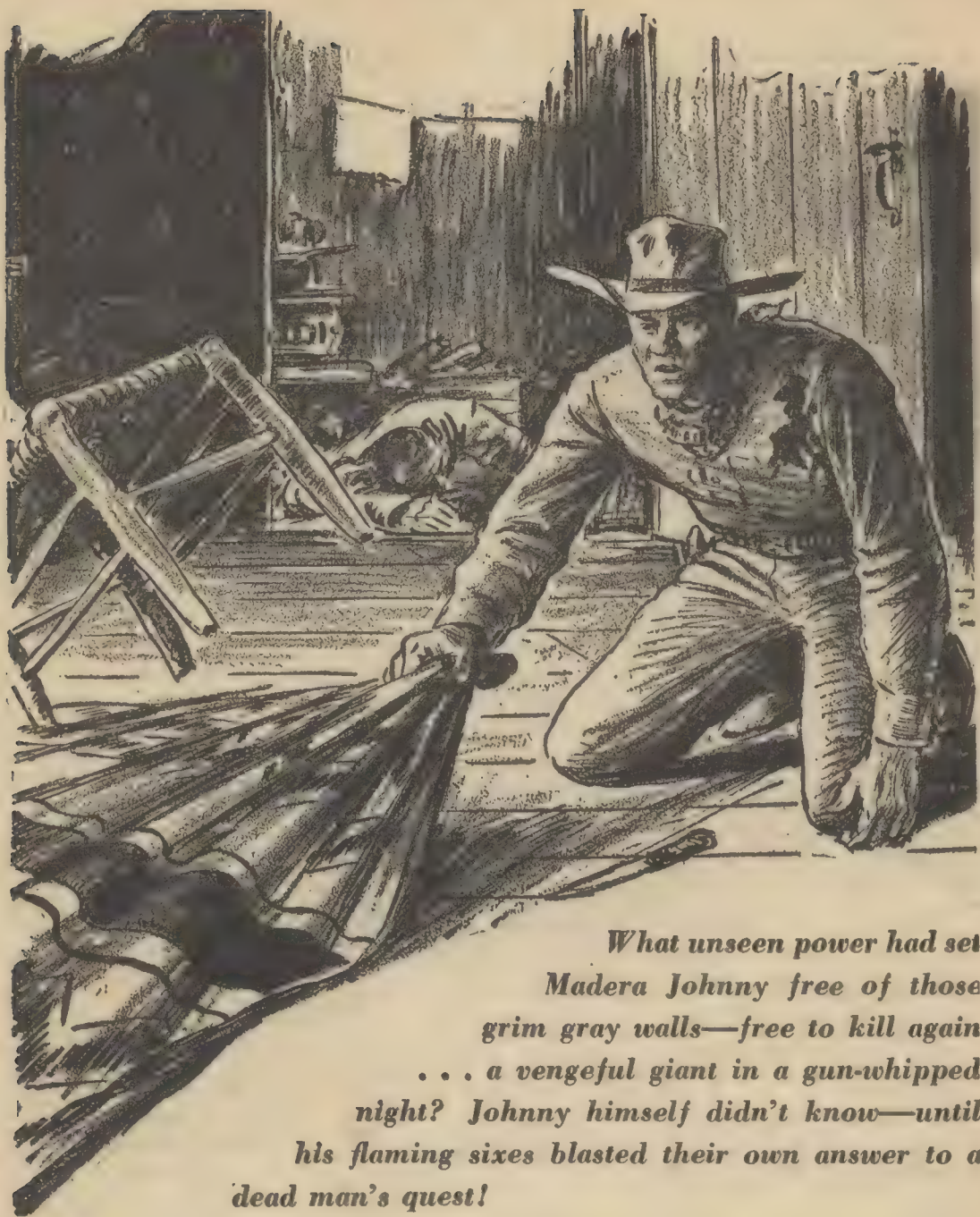
(Continued on page 130)

As he fell, Johnny grabbed
at the edge of the rug. . . .



A Novel by
M. HOWARD LANE

TERROR AT TIMBERLINE



*What unseen power had set
Madera Johnny free of those
grim gray walls—free to kill again
... a vengeful giant in a gun-whipped
night? Johnny himself didn't know—until
his flaming sixes blasted their own answer to a
dead man's quest!*

CHAPTER ONE

Killer's Return

MADERA JOHNNY PAYNE started home to the Sierras, to a homestead he had treasured in his memories. His face was deeply bronzed, and at least, he thought with some cynicism, the strangers he passed on

his ride across the stage road over Pacheco Pass wouldn't guess that the warden of San Quentin had only recently handed him a pardon. He wore no prison pallor, for he'd spent a good share of these last five years in road camps, a trusty who seemed to bring out the good in men instead of the evil. He could talk to them with his big, easy grin, and he seldom had

to do more than double one of his fists to enforce an order.

It was whispered about the camps that Madera Johnny was here because he'd killed a man with one of those fists.

And now he was free, and coming back to a country he remembered, to a homestead his folks had taken up when California was mighty young. The apple trees on it, Madera thought pleasurably, would be gnarled old veterans now, and they'd be glad to see him, even if some other people in that Bear Lake country might not share the same sentiments. There was enough open land on his homestead for a man to raise a little hay, and he could harvest apples from those trees in the orchard. A man whose tastes had grown spartan simple could make a living up there.

For just living was the main thing. Living free. Yet the reflection brought a brief frown to his forehead. Somebody with a heap of power had gotten him out of prison. Somebody who might have an axe to grind in those mountains that rose, ridge on leaping ridge, almost to the sky.

However, he counseled himself, there was no use in a man crossing bridges until he came to them. A pair of good, hard-riding days lay ahead before he broke through the mists of the San Joaquin and got a first glimpse of the mountains where he'd been born.

Meanwhile he had some cautious questions to ask when he reached Madera, the town after which his dad had named him.

His mind went back, as he rode the long road through shining fields of wheat and grain, to a night in San Francisco when a young buck with more vinegar in his veins than sense had knocked a man into an iron lamp-post and watched him fall with a cracked skull. The fact that he had fought in self defense, when a knife had flashed from Nate Grimm's sleeve, had never been substantiated in court, for one simple reason. The evidence had disap-

peared. By the time a puffing policeman had arrived on the scene and Madera had explained about the knife, it couldn't be found, and so Madera Johnny Payne had gone to jail.

A witness called by the prosecution had sat in the witness chair and said righteously, "The argument started in the Peacock Saloon. Dunno just what it was all about. I was havin' a beer myself, and minding my own business. But I saw it all. Fellers who get mad when they drink shouldn't drink—"

The judge had ordered that part of the testimony stricken from the record, but the jury had heard Harry Tollmer's words and their minds were colored with prejudice.

Tollmer's testimony had continued, "They went outside to settle their argument, and some of us kind of trailed along after them. I can't say who swung first, but they started mixing it, and then this feller—" he'd indicated Madera Johnny—"swung a punch that sure was enough to end any fight, but he kept on punching this fellow right back into the lamppost. No, I didn't see any knife in the other feller's hand."

Madera's attorney had tried to show how his client had merely been defending himself against an unprovoked attack at the hands of another Bear Lake man who was trying to steal the water rights to a stream that crossed Madera Johnny's homestead. But he couldn't produce the knife that would make it an open and shut case of self defense, and Madera guessed that Nate Grimm, down in hell, had probably done some grinning. Living behind gray walls and in barb-wire enclosures patrolled by road guards could sometimes hurt a man's soul worse than death.

But Madera Johnny had tried to make the best of it, and there were prisoners and road foremen alike who'd been sorry to see him leave when that unexpected pardon had come through.

Even the warden had a word of praise for him, a cheap suit of clothes, and a ten dollar bill to speed him into the free world again. "You made a fine record as a model prisoner, Payne," he'd said in parting. "I hope you'll go back to your old life without bitterness."

Madera had looked back at the man behind the desk out of curiously tawny eyes that were almost the color of his wheat-colored hair, and told him unflinchingly, "Sir, I'm hoping to be able to do the same thing. People leave me alone, I'll do the same, but I dunno—"

"What do you mean, you don't know?" the warden's glance had sharpened.

"Just this, sir," Madera had responded. "I know, and you know, that somebody with a heap of influence must have got the governor to review my case and pardon me. I ain't got a friend from Madera to Bear Lake with enough prestige to git inside the state house, let alone the governor's office. So somebody else musta done it, and I aim to find out who and why."

"I wouldn't look this kind of a gift horse in the mouth if I were you, Payne," said the warden drily. "Why not let sleeping dogs lie?"

Madera's infectious grin had broken the broad contours of his face. "Long as they sleep it'll be all right," he'd answered. "It's when they start wakin' up that you got to look out."

MADERA was a gold camp that had turned into a farming community. Wheat blanketed most of the land, but some were trying grapes and fruit trees, and talking about building canals to irrigate their land.

Five years had sure brought changes. Madera rode the town's main street and he didn't recognize a soul on the board walks, but the Bear Lake Rendezvous was a familiar name above one of the taverns, and he turned the mount he'd bought

into the hitchrail which stood before it.

Old Jemm Aiken had had an eye to business long ago, figuring there were a lot of Bear Lake men who might come to town once in a while thirsting for a drink, and if they could see a familiar name it was likely the saloon they'd patronize. Jemm Aiken hadn't been wrong. His establishment was fifty miles from the Bear, but he knew as much about what was going on up there as the residents themselves. Sometimes more.

Madera pushed through the swing doors, and his bulk just about blocked them. There were few old-timers in this town who would forget Madera Johnny's tawny hair and tawny eyes, and his completely infectious grin. *

The barroom was dusky after the brightness outside, but there was nothing wrong with the eyes of the wizened little man behind the spotless bar.

"Johnny!" his involuntary shout startled the other customers at the bar. "Madera Johnny Payne! Boy, welcome home! Welcome. Hear tell you killed that skunk Nate Grimm and had to serve some time for it. A danged shame, boy. A danged shame. I never knew a man who deserved killin' more!"

Madera drew a deep breath, and silently thanked old Jemm for his words. The news of his return would get around this town in a hurry, and so would Jemm's commendation. He didn't feel like a jailbird coming home. Jemm's words made him feel fine. *Like I still belong here*, Madera thought.

Jemm's hand disappeared in Madera's huge paw, and he winced. "Son," he said more softly, "you don't know your own strength." And more softly still, "You'll need every bit of it."

Madera Johnny Payne hardly heard old Jemm's last words, for his eyes were growing more accustomed to the dimness now, and he saw a man down the line of log stools along the bar that he remem-

bered. The man's fat length was draped across the shining oak, and his face was studiously averted, but Madera was still able to recognize him.

"Since when," his voice was a rumbling whisper in his chest, "did a gent named Harry Tollmer come to Madera?"

"Him?" old Jemm's white head jerked cautiously. "Hell, he's practically an old-timer now. Got here nigh on five years ago, after we read in the papers that you'd been sent up for killin' Nate Grimm."

Madera's tawny eyes had started to gleam, for the flash-anger that was so much a part of his nature sent shock waves through him. "What's his business?" he asked.

"He bought out Nick's heirs up at the Bear," old Jemm explained readily. "Been doing some building and developing up there. I hear he might like to buy your place—an' then," Old Jemm talked on while his busy hands set out a bottle of beer, "there's the Kaner tribe. You remember 'em. You ought to. Ol' King Kaner, and Kathy. Wildfire we used to call her—"

"She isn't married yet?" the question broke involuntarily from Madera Johnny.

The white-haired barkeep's face was seamed with wrinkles, but when he smiled a thousand more seemed to mar his leathery skin. "Son," he said, "I figure she's been waitin' for you."

The violence that was in Madera almost broke its bounds, but his hands squeezed the beer glass in front of him instead of Jemm Aiken's throat. "Jemm," he said, "don't ever let me hear you say that again."

"Hell," said Jemm, and he wasn't abashed, "she's damnation on a horse, Venus in a dress, and plain hell for those she don't like. Forget that last part if yuh want, but just remember one thing. She's always liked you."

Madera Johnny Payne closed his eyes

for a moment, and the memories that flooded his mind were ones he'd taught himself to forget during five years away from this country. A man behind prison walls could not afford to remember a girl like Kathy Kaner—and keep his sanity.

"They hate my guts," he told Jemm Aiken. "King holed up on the Bear before my dad ever saw it. He was the first to take up a claim there. My dad was the second, and mebbe he was a damn fool, but he spent his time developing what he had, while King spent his trying to buy out other homesteaders who came along. He was the one who started logging around the lake, and he owns most of the land. My dad could of had the same idea, but instead he planted apple trees."

"Maybe your daddy wasn't such a fool," said Jemm Aiken keenly. "He was smart enough to set his claim across Big Creek, the main stream that feeds the Bear. Cut off that flow and King Kaner's lake will run dry ever' year, come September. Then he can't float logs to his mill. This here upstart, Harry Tollmer now, he took over where Nate Grimm left off—"

"What do you mean, 'took over?'" Madera cut in, and his voice was a rumble that carried farther than he guessed.

"Let's make this a family talk," a new voice said, and Madera Johnny twisted on his stool. Harry Tollmer was fat, but he could walk like a cat, and that spoke of muscles a man couldn't see. He stood two feet away now, and the smile on his face was the same he'd showed a jury back in San Francisco. Madera wanted to smash a fist into his face, but he thought *The next time I won't get a pardon.*

"Payne," the fat man said, and the smile was still on his lips, "you don't want to go back to the Bear. I'll put a thousand dollars in your pocket, and you can head someplace and make a new start. You know that Sierra country. There ain't many people up there, but they got

long memories. Some of 'em were friends of Nate Grimm."

"And some of them," said Madera through tight-clenched teeth, "were friends of mine."

He could stand no more of Tollmer's company without throwing a fist, and so he turned with a nod to Jemm and walked from the Rendezvous. Another time might come to talk to Aiken. He contained more news than a newspaper, but Tollmer's interference had cut their talk short. Questions and surmises were still rioting through Madera's head as he stepped out into the white shine of the sun and blinked to clear his eyes.

When he opened them a buckboard had drawn up with a clatter beyond the hitch-rail, and a clear voice said, "If it isn't the same old Johnny Payne, still battling the beer!"

Madera's lips edged in against his teeth. He'd taken about as much as a man could in one afternoon, and he started for his horse, but the voice of the man with the girl stopped him in his tracks.

King Kaner said from the seat of the buckboard "Payne, I want to see you at the Lodge tomorrow morning."

The Lodge was a log mansion, bigger than most city halls, that King Kaner had built on the shores of the Bear.

Madera looked at the black-garbed man. King Kaner in his youth had matched Johnny Payne's height and build, but now age had bent his shoulders and put iron-gray in his dark hair. It had seamed his face but the power in the man was still like a radiant impulse that reached out to touch each listener.

Madera stood on the curb, and the rush of his breathing stirred the plain blue of his cheap suit. "I'll be home tomorrow," he said. "If you want to see me, Kaner, you know where I live."

"Where you used to live," said King Kaner, and the buggywhip in his hand touched the flanks of his team. The

matched bays rocketed down the street as though a barrier had been lifted in front of them.

Madera stood there, a giant man, and passersby on the board walk eddied about him, but they moved carefully, for they could see that he didn't even know they were there. His tawny eyes were blank.

Kaner had said, "*Where you used to live.*" What had he meant by that? But even as he asked himself the question part of Madera's mind was filled with the picture of the girl he hadn't seen for five years. She hadn't changed much. Her hair was still the wicked red of fire crowning through pine-tops, and her complexion was that clear pale color the sun couldn't touch. The rest of her was all woman now. How had he seen that much of her when he'd kept his eyes on her father? That was another question Johnny Payne couldn't answer.

He rode from Madera, and the valley mists of afternoon hung like a white curtain over the country he yearned to see. The flatlands seemed illimitable, stretching away on all sides, golden and brown where some harvests were still coming on, and others had already been plowed for fall crops. Madera put his heels into the flanks of his mount and rode with a curse on his lips. A curse for these miles he had to travel before he reached the Bear.

As twilight came, he reached the white-oak foothills and slowed a little, for now he could see the Sierras that had been banned from his sight for so long. He drank in his first view of these home ridges like a man starved for water. The sight of pines on far slopes was like the sharp taste of food on his lips, and he drew in a deep breath that was already scented with a hint of the forests that lay ahead.

He traveled that night, stopping only to let his mount drink from a stream that came down out of the high country, and then he kept riding, for the road was as

familiar to him as a picture etched on glass. Five years, he found, could not dull a man's memories for something that he treasured.

And one of the things he'd thought about during bleak nights had been the log house his father had built on their homestead, a cabin that had started with one room, and grown from there until it had rambled almost to the banks of Big Creek. Home it had been for Johnny Payne. He had helped bury his father beneath one of the apple trees he had loved, and a year later he'd buried his mother beside her husband. It had left him alone in a big house that hadn't meant much to a youngster of twenty, but now, these five years later, he could cherish every room and think of the cobwebs and rat's nest he'd have to clean out before he could move in.

WHAT had King Kaner meant? "Where you used to live!" he'd said, and with a dread that dulled the sharp edge of his pleasure at getting back to the Bear, Madera rode across Saddleback Hump and saw the magnificent shine of the Lake below him, resting like some dark jewel in its frame of pines. A late moon was rising, and it touched the waters and made them glow like a star sapphire, all shot with vibrant color. Down there was the home he'd waited five years to see, and right now that was all that mattered.

Who had gained his pardon was of no consequence. Why Harry Tollmer had come into this Bear Lake country bothered him not at all. Neither did the wild-fire girl, Kathy, nor her father, King Kaner.

"Keep moving, partner," he counseled his horse. "You'll bed down tonight in mountain hay!"

They moved along the slanting road from Saddleback Hump, and a man coming home could remember a shortcut

through the pines that would carry him across a sharp ridge, then drop him quickly to Big Creek. Madera swung his mount from the road that led on around the Lake to Kaner's sawmill, and the trail was brush-choked after all these years and clogged with creeping vines. He fought them like they were something alive, and cursed the waste of time, but he made the ridge and dropped across it with the faint music of Big Creek rising like a faroff symphony into his ears. The apple trees were in bloom, too, and their fragrance mingled with the tang of the pines swept up into his nostrils and filled him with a raging impatience. He was close to home now. Home after prison walls and barbed-wire barricades.

Madera Johnny Payne savored every scent as his mount leveled off into flat land, and he could see ahead to the clearing his father had made.

Only now the rising moon was pitiless. It showed the wild hay and gnarled apple trees, but there was no house where a house should have stood. No house. Just a pile of blackened ashes, and the gaunt length of a chimney, reaching toward the treetops!

Madera halted his fagged mount. There wasn't much reason to push the animal farther, for now he could see what King Kaner had meant. Someone had burned him out—someone who hadn't wanted him to stay here if he ever got out of prison and came back to this high country. But still another had gained him a pardon. Someone who knew Madera Johnny Payne well enough to be certain that he'd head for the Bear and home the minute he was free.

"One of 'em wants me here," Madera said aloud into the silence of the clearing, "and one of 'em don't."

He was silent a moment then, listening to his own thoughts, and he added "They can both go to hell! Come tomorrow, I start a new home. One even Dad and

Mother could be mighty well proud of!"

There'd been bedding in the house that had burned, but there was none now, and the night was cold. Madera rolled in his saddle blanket on a bed of needles beneath a pine, and sleep came to make him forget black ashes, gaunt chimneys and flame-haired girls.

He woke with the sun crawling up over the Lake, and Big Creek was buoyant, galloping down its stony bed, when he put his head into its icy waters to clear his eyes and brain.

Madera raised a dripping face, and heard an alien sound beyond the range of his vision. It was coming up-grade from the lake road, along ruts long unused. And then, as he wiped his eyes dry with his shirt, he saw first the laboring mules, and then a pair of tall wagons and trailers loaded high with shining lumber. Long whips cracked in the hands of the drivers to force the mules up the last steep rise into the clearing where only the gaunt chimney stood. Madera Johnny Payne moved to stand beside the granite monument that was all he had left to claim as his own.

One of the drivers swung his wagon expertly and raised a hand. "Howdy, Johnny," he grinned. "Danged good to see you back."

Handy was about the only name people ever called the driver, and Madera remembered that he'd always stuck pretty close to Kathy Kaner, running her errands, and handling most of the chores she wanted done about King Kaner's big home and land.

"Morning," he answered the man's wave with a nod of his flaxen head, and stood there, still not understanding the meaning of this early visit such a long way from town.

"Where you want this stuff stacked, Johnny?" Handy asked.

"What do you mean, stacked?" Madera asked. "I haven't got the *dinero* to buy

one of them boards, let alone two wagon-loads!"

"Compliments of Miss Kathy," the driver laughed. "When she found out your house had burned down she set me'n Bill here to work last night makin' up these loads. Lordy, that girl was red as her hair."

Something Madera hadn't noticed the night before, when his grief was sharp, came to him now. It was a faint scent that rose to his nostrils, and he turned and scraped a foot through the white crust of the top ashes. Beneath them was heat, and as he scraped deeper the dulllest of red coals glowed up at him like mocking eyes.

Madera turned to face the wagoners. "When did my place burn?" he asked slowly.

"Why only jest a couple of nights ago," said Handy. "Danged shame it had to happen just before you come home."

Someone had gained foreknowledge that he was being pardoned, but they hadn't burned him out until they were sure of it. "How come," he asked, "that Kathy didn't hear this news about the house sooner?"

"She jest got back from Sacramento yesterday," said Handy. "Rode the Shortline down the valley, and King picked her up in Madera."

"Anybody else from here been up that way lately?" Madera Johnny asked carefully.

"That feller down the crik from you, Tollmer, he's done spent some time there. Jest got back here hisself 'bout three days ago."

Kathy Kaner in Sacramento. Harry Tollmer in Sacramento. Which one had had the influence to gain him a pardon? And why would either of them want him back here? They were questions as answerless as the morning breeze sighing through the tall sugar pines rimming the clearing.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Rides the Hills

THERE was a queer tightness in Madera's throat as he looked at the shining lumber on those wagons. It was the first time anyone had figured on doing him a favor in a long time. But it was one he couldn't accept.

"Take them loads back to Kaner's mill, Handy," he ordered. "Tell Kathy I aim to cut my own logs. But—" he couldn't keep himself from adding—"You can give her my thanks, too, when you see her."

The driver shook his head. "Same old stiff-necked Madera," he said sorrowfully. "Boy, the only thing wuss than bein' a fool, is bein' a blind fool!"

He cracked his whip, and the mules strained into movement. Madera Johnny Payne held his place beside the chimney until they were out of sight, and then he went to rummage through the small sack of groceries he'd brought with him. He found some crackers and a little jerky that was enough to stop the clamor of his stomach, but it couldn't quell the questions rioting through his mind.

King Kaner had known yesterday that his place had burned here, but when they'd met him in front of the Rendezvous the girl obviously had heard nothing about it. Had King Kaner fired his home, figuring that if Johnny Payne was burned out he'd pull stakes and leave the Bear? Or was this Tollmer's work? Or the spiteful hand of some friend of Nate Grimm's?

Maybe, Madera counseled himself grimly, you better take a little ride and see how things shape up. Of only one thing was he bleakly certain. Someone would put their cards on the table soon.

Madera saddled his mount and rode close to the banks of Big Creek, studying the width and depth of the stream. It was one of the few coming down from the heights that rarely lost its volume during

the hot summer and fall months. A white flood fed by giant springs back in the high gorges. But logs, rocks and dirt could dam it, control the flow of water and harness it to a wheel that would spin shining saws. Madera looked across the stream at the nodding old apple trees that he remembered so well. If Big Creek was harnessed, the pool would destroy that orchard.

I'll never do it! Madera thought. And neither will any other man!

There were monarch pines on those high slopes behind his homestead that would cut into millions of feet of lumber, and put a million dollars into the hands of the man who could build a dam and mill here, and suddenly it occurred to him that he might have the key in his hands to King Kaner's ambition. With one mill here, and his other at the lower tip of the Bear, he could dominate all this high country for hundreds of square miles. He could in all truth become the king of the Sierras.

Slowly Madera rode the dim ruts of what had been a road five years ago, and he saw a rider coming up toward him through the trees. Morning light slashed down through the pines, and caught the gleam of bright metal on the rider's flapping vest. Madera felt his muscles freeze. A man who'd spent five years with the constant reminder of badges on his mind could not mistake the sight of another one.

The sheriff swung his mount solidly across the roadway, and his chilly eyes surveyed the man riding toward him. "Payne?" he asked.

Madera nodded. The sheriff was big, with a soft paunch that punched against the horn of his saddle. He didn't look like a man who rode any more than necessary. Tiny broken veins seamed his cheeks and bulbous nose, but the gun in the holster at his hip was meant for business.

"Payne," the sheriff said, "my name's Kimbro. Was told yesterday that you were back from Quentin, but I missed seein' you in town."

"Who," Madera asked thinly, and he kept his big hands clenched on the nub of his own saddle, "told you I was back?"

"That," said Jack Kimbro, "ain't none of your concern, mister. What I rode up here to tell you is that you'd better be a good dog! I'll keep an eye on you, and the first wrong move you make, back you go to finish out your visit in the Big House!"

Madera found himself trembling. There was nothing he wanted more in the world than to ride close and smash just one blow to the lawman's big nose, but he stayed the impulse.

"My pardon," he said, "had no strings attached to it, Kimbro. I'm as free right now as you—mebbe freer."

"And what do you mean by that, Payne?"

"That somebody told you to come up here and try to help them chase me off my homestead. Burn a man's house, and tell him he can't defend himself, and you pretty well got him licked. So I'll tell you this, Kimbro. I ain't going to start trouble with any man in these mountains—but I ain't going to run if it comes lookin' for me. I'm here to stay!"

"You're a damned fool!" the sheriff said thickly, and he swung his fine palomino, and Madera saw the flash of his Spanish spurs as they struck the animal's flanks.

He waited until the sound of hooves had faded, and then moved forward again. *Card number one*, he thought.

A half mile farther on was the homestead claim that had belonged to Nate Grimm, and now after the realization that had come to him this morning he could see why Grimm had tried by every means to buy him out after the death of his parents. A wild kid, the man had reasoned,

might like the lure of quick dollars. It had been his motive for following Johnny Payne to San Francisco where he had gone to see the big city after years of isolation in the valley.

In the Peacock they had met, and Madera remembered that he'd told Grimm scathingly "I'd as leave sell you my heart as that hunk of land."

"Maybe I'll have that, too," Nate Grimm had answered, and taken the first wild swing that had started their fight. He hadn't pulled the knife from his sleeve until one of Madera's blows had knocked most of the wind out of him, and he'd known that he was going to take a licking. Madera Johnny remembered his first sight of that knife—a short, thick-bladed hunting knife with a deerhorn handle that had a silver button on the end of it. If he ever saw that knife again, Madera knew, he would recognize it—and he also knew that he would never feel completely cleared of that manslaughter charge until he could show that knife to the judge who had convicted him.

But now was not the time for such memories. He was free, and he had his troubles. Troubles piling one on top of another, like the logs he was going to use to rebuild the home fire had destroyed. But the sheriff was against him. Arrest on any kind of charge might send him back to jail.

Walk light, Madera counseled himself. *You better walk light, Johnny Payne.*

Who had ordered Kimbro to ride fifty miles to pay him a visit? Someone with power in his grasp, because the sheriff didn't look like the kind of man who made many rides unless it was necessary.

The pines spread out in a wide arc as he rode from them into what had been Nate Grimm's clearing. Once there'd been only a ramshackle cabin here, with the chinking falling from between the logs, but now the sight of what Harry Tollmer had done astonished him.

There were a dozen neat cabins set between shading pines. Peeled logs gleamed where workmen were preparing them to erect more cabins. Cabins that ran clean down to the lake road. There were foundations already laid for at least a couple of dozen more.

Madera drew rein. "Well I'll be damned!" he exclaimed softly, and his eyes touched what had once been Grimm's swaybacked shack. A man wouldn't know it now. All rebuilt, it was the most impressive building in the clearing, and Harry Tollmer, his big bulk cased in a fancy plaid shirt and fawn-hued California pants, was just about as impressive as his establishment.

In the yard, directing the workmen, he saw the tall rider pause on the edge of the clearing and swung toward him. "Payne," he recognized Madera's wheat-colored hair, "Payne, ride on in. I've been hoping you'd pay me a visit today. I've got a cabin you can use until you get your house rebuilt. That sure was damned tough luck, friend," he added as Madera met him in the center of the yard. "Getting burned out just before making it home—"

The straight glance in Madera's tawny eyes stopped the San Franciscan in mid-speech. "You knew I'd been burned out yesterday," Madera Johnny said flatly, "but I don't recollect you mentionin' it to me."

"Well, now," Harry Tollmer flushed, "I ain't the kind of man who passes on bad tidings to a fella unless I can help it."

"You passed some on in a San Francisco court," Madera said acidly. "I ain't forgot you mentioning that fellers who get mad when they drink shouldn't drink. And while we're talking, it seems kinda funny that you should come clean from 'Frisco to claim a run-down homestead that was worth nothin' up in these here mountains."

HARRY TOLLMER'S florid face had turned the color of paste, but he still tried to grin. "Now, Payne," he said, "now, Payne, all I did that time was tell what I saw. Don't hold that against me, fella. I moved up here on account of my health. This is the finest climate in the world."

"Trouble with you is," Johnny said in the same acid tones, "you just didn't see enough at the right time. Somebody got away with a hunting knife. It wasn't Nate Grimm's dying that convicted me. It was that knife!"

"Look, neighbor," Tollmer's grin was having trouble staying on his face, "what's past is past. Let's forget it. I'm doing a lot of work here, spending a lot of money, because I think this climate is so fine. When I'm done, I'll have the cabins to take care of a heap of people who will be glad to come up here from the San Joaquin to rest up a while in summertime. But before my project can be complete, I'm going to need more land. Now that you're burned out, maybe you'd consider selling me your homestead. That old apple orchard now. We could cut it out and build cabins there—"

"That old apple orchard," flash anger was making Madera's hands tremble with the desire to squeeze Tollmer's throat, "stays right where it is."

"I offered you a thousand dollars yesterday," Tollmer had regained his composure. "This morning I'll raise the ante to five. It's as high as I'll go, Payne. That property ain't worth a cent to you now."

"That homestead," Madera said with a crooked smile on his lips, "is the only thing I own in the world, Tollmer, and it ain't goin' to pass from my hands long as I'm alive."

A queer, in-drawn look touched Tollmer's dark eyes, and seemed to make them opaque as obsidian. A big man, he drew himself to his full height. "You're

calling the hand, Payne," he said briefly, and started to turn away. "I hope you don't regret your decision."

Madera watched the man move again to his workmen, and he thought, *All the cards ain't played yet. Them cabins could accommodate a heap of lumberjacks!*

The Lake road was the same as he had recalled it on many lonesome nights, winding through shade and sunlight along the twinkling shore. Pines reached upward, and the air was not the same as a man breathed in a prison road camp.

Free, Madera thought. Free!

Then he heard the rush of reckless hoofs along the road ahead of him, and he guessed, before the big bay came into view, that its rider might be Kathleen Kaner. She rode that way, headlong into everything, and Madera braced himself for more trouble. He had refused her gift, and that would require explanations. For an instant he thought of trying to turn into the trees to avoid the meeting, and then the choice was taken from him, for the girl had spotted him on the road.

"Johnny!" she exclaimed. "I was just coming over to see you."

"Everybody sure gets up early in this country," Madera grunted. "It ain't eight o'clock yet."

The sight of the girl took his breath. She was wildfire on a horse that was almost the flaming color of her hair, but it was the vibrant anger transfiguring her face that held his attention.

"Johnny Payne," she ignored his remark, "I told Handy to take that lumber back to your place a second time. If you don't want it, set a match to it! Neighbors help each other when they're in trouble up here." Something seemed to choke the girl's voice. "They help each other, Johnny. A little lumber—"

Neighbors help each other. The words could mean a lot, and they could mean little but suddenly Madera Johnny Payne didn't care. His horse was close beside

the girl's and the wild impulses he'd throttled for five years broke through his reserve and he reached toward her.

She was light as a feather coming into the strength of his arms, and Madera Johnny Payne tasted the sweetness of her lips for the first time.

There was a giving in them that shook him, and then another voice that seemed to come from faraway said gruffly, "Daughter, what in Hades is the meaning of this?"

The words broke them apart, but Madera Johnny still held the girl in his arms as he stared across the tops of her flame-haired head. King Kaner sat a big black horse in front of them. A mount that matched the hue of his suit, but not the color that suffused his leathery face. He was red from the roots of his sparse hair to the white collar that circled his neck.

Kathy struggled in Madera's arms, and he set her gently on her feet. "The meaning," said the girl, and she squared herself like a fighter, "is that I'm on Johnny Payne's side. Now do your damndest, dad!"

King Kaner sat his big black, and for once he could think of nothing to say.

Madera waited, trying to gain control of his jumping nerves, for he'd never been shaken like this before.

It was the girl who broke the silence, and she asked a question that shocked Madera like a thrown fist. "Dad, did you burn Johnny's place?"

King Kaner was regaining some of his composure. "Daughter," he said, "this bullheaded young man told me he wouldn't come to the Lodge, so I was on my way over to his homestead. This talk is between us. I have never held with women interfering in men's business!"

A calm smile that far surpassed Madera Johnny Payne's knowledge of women, touched the girl's lips and she said meekly, "Yes, dad. You men do the talking. I'll ride on home—"

Her reaction left them both staring at each other, and it was finally Madera's lips that broke into a grin. "Sir," he said, "it takes better men than us to understand a woman."

"A woman's wiles," King Kaner murmured. "I wonder what she's got up her sleeve, Johnny?"

"I wouldn't try and guess," Madera shook his head. "But now that she's gone, we might as well make our talk here. What were you aimin' to see me about?"

King Kaner had his opening, but for the space of a minute he sat without speaking. A strong-faced man, he seemed at a loss for words. "Johnny," he said finally, "no one regretted more than me the news that you'd been sent to prison. Believe me, I was always a friend of your father's, even though the two of us never saw eye to eye. Perhaps I wanted more than he did. This country needs developing. There are untold opportunities here for men with vision. I tried to convince your father of that, but all he wanted to do was raise apples, and lead a happy life."

"Not such a bad ambition," Madera commented drily.

King Kaner went on as though he hadn't heard the words. "I talked to him many times about the advantages of pooling our resources, but he was never willing to listen."

"The Payne resources," Madera said deliberately, and he could see where this talk was leading, "are nothing more than Big Creek. There's stands of timber along its banks that could be logged, if a mill was built on our place."

"You've expressed it admirably," said King Kaner. Now—

"Now," Madera said simply, "my answer is the same as my dad's. I aim to grow apples and hay, and stay happy—if people will quit pestering me." His voice heated up a little. "I like money same as the next fella, but I ain't going to see my orchards covered with water!"

King Kaner drew a shaking breath, and Madera could see that the older man was trying hard to control his temper. He had to admire the quietness of Kaner's voice when he spoke again.

"Johnny," he said, "that may be your last word, but if that apple orchard you seem to cherish could be saved, perhaps you'd have a different answer. Think it over, Johnny, and look around—don't forget," a wintry smile moved his lips, "you've got Kathy to worry about now."

Madera watched Kaner turn the black and thunder back the way he had come. But the big horse had hardly passed from view when Madera heard the whip-crash of rifle fire. The sound came echoing through the trees, torn into multiple shreds by the thickness of the foliage. Just one report, but the hooves of Kaner's black were stilled.

Madera had no spurs, but the heels of his boots bored deep into the flanks of his mount, and the startled animal leaped forward. Around the bend, with a blankness and a horror filling his mind, Madera rode, and a hundred yards in front of him he saw the black. For a second relief touched him, and then he realized the big animal's saddle was empty. King Kaner lay beside his mount, a huddled shape in the morning shadow.

He heard the crash of underbrush as a horseman raced away through the trees, and for an instant he debated whether he should try and follow the killer, or tend King Kaner.

Then the decision was taken from him, for roaring back down the road, her hair whipping like wild-fire, came Kathy. They reached her father at almost the same time, and piled from their saddles. King Kaner lay at their feet, a widening red stain bright against the whiteness of his shirt.

Madera knelt beside him, put his ear close to the man's still face, and he could hear the faintest of shallow breaths mov-

ing slowly in and out of his parted lips.

"Dead?" Kathy whispered. She was crouched beside him, but Madera didn't look at her.

"Not yet," he said with unconscious grimness, and his big hands were gentle as he opened Kaner's shirt. Blood welled strongly from a hole above his left breast, and Madera heard the sound of tearing cloth.

White strips of clothing were pressed into his hand. "I know now," said Kathleen Kaner, and her voice carried the same iron as her father's, "why women wear petticoats! Patch him up, Johnny. We'll try and get him home."

Madera shook his head. "We've got to have a mattress to lay him on," he said without looking up. "Go get Handy. Bring a buckboard. Your dad ain't goin' to die, Kathy." His amber eyes were flaming now as he glanced at the girl. "No damned bushwhacker is going to kill King Kaner!"

"But why?" the girl paused for a moment, her hand on the horn of the bay's saddle, and her gray-green eyes looked suddenly like those of a hurt child. "Why, Johnny? Why should anyone want to shoot my father?"

Madera's lips were drawn back against his teeth. "I don't know," he said, "but I aim to find out. I thought I'd be number one."

He watched the girl speed away, and he was still crouched over her father, trying as much with the pressure of his big hands as anything else to keep life in the man, when he heard the racket of hooves coming along the road behind him.

The horsemen drew up, and a voice that Madera remembered said. "It don't take you long to get into trouble, Payne!"

Madera Johnny Payne looked up at Jack Kimbro. The man's badge still flashed from the lapel of his vest, and his paunch still punched the saddlehorn. The smile on his full lips was triumphant, and

his right hand was curled about the butt of his holstered Colt.

"You sure get to the right place at the right time don't you, sheriff?" Madera said, and he couldn't control the savagery that came into his voice.

"I'm usually around where trouble starts," Kimbro said complacently. "I knew you'd bring it to the Bear. Now you've shot King Kaner, and this time you'll pay for it. There'll be a rope at the end of this trail!"

"Not for me," Madera said softly, and he rose from beside the wounded man. "How come you were so handy when the shootin' started?"

The sheriff's red face flushed. "I've been keeping my eye on you, Payne," he blustered. "When you left Harry's and headed this way, I wasn't far behind."

"Harry?" drawled Madera ironically. "I didn't know you knew us folks up here except by our last names!"

"Harry Tollmer is an old friend of mine," the sheriff said, "but you ain't. This looks like attempted murder to me. Kaner's been wanting to buy you out, and mebbe you figgered he was the one who torched your house. So mebbe you wanted to even the score, and took a potshot at him when you saw him on the road this morning."

I'm going to have this laid on me, Madera thought. Kimbro can make an open and shut case to show any judge unless I find the man who shot Kaner.

He edged a step closer to the sheriff's palomino. "You aimin' to arrest me?" he asked.

The confidence in Jack Kimbro's voice was complete. "You're going to come along with me for questionin'," he said. "I knew when I come up here that you'd break over the traces and end up by goin' back to Madera with me. Most of you parolees do—"

"This one," Madera said, and he let the flash anger in him have full play, "is

goin' to fool you!" He moved fast for a big man, faster than the sheriff with his hand on his Colt, and wrapped his arms about the lawman's middle. Kimbro's body struck the road with a thud that almost shook the pines banding it. He tried to draw his gun, but Madera Johnny's fist took those thoughts from his mind.

He stood up and looked down at the lawman, and Kimbro's jaw was already starting to swell. The sheriff wouldn't wake up for awhile, Madera thought grimly, but when he did there'd be hell to pay!

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Man's Trail

IN THE sheriff's vest he found a pad of paper and a pencil, and he wrote Kathy a brief note:

Kimbrow seems to think I shot your dad. I didn't, but I guess I've got to prove it.

He didn't sign the note. Kathleen Kaner would know who had written it.

He took a last look at King Kaner, lying unconscious not far from the sheriff, and some color was beginning to come back into the lumberman's cheeks. He hoped the King would live, and the time had been, Madera remembered, when he wouldn't have cared. But King Kaner had made a couple of remarks a while ago that had stayed with him.

He'd said, "If that apple orchard could be saved, you might have a different answer." And he'd added "Look around—you've got Kathy to worry about now."

Madera felt his jaws clench as he mounted. Yes, he had Kathy to worry about. She was not the girl to give her lips to any man unless it might mean something. He tasted their sweetness again, and then from his saddle he looked down at one wounded man, and another who would not wake up for a while, and a

deep, shuddering breath shook his chest.

The future loomed formidably before him.

Madera rode back the way he had come, and he remembered a trail that skirted Harry Tollmer's cabins. A path that would lead him up to what was left of his homestead. He found the trail and traveled it, and drew up cautiously as he heard the sound of hammers and saws ahead of him.

Peering through the trees, he saw something that made him blink. There were not two, but a half dozen wagons in the yard before the gaunt chimney. A chimney that wasn't going to be gaunt very long, for men were swarming over the premises, carrying shining lumber to carpenters who were busy with their hammers and saws.

I can't go out and stop 'em! Madera thought. I can't let them see me. That Kimbro is going to be on my tail just as soon as he opens his eyes.

Kathy had ordered the rebuilding of his home. Kathy had used her red hair and her smile to convince the Governor that Madera Johnny Payne deserved a pardon. He was sure of it now. Harry Tollmer's testimony had put him in San Quentin, and Harry Tollmer had taken over Nate Grimm's homestead.

He's buildin' cabins, playing both ends against the middle, Madera thought as he watched the busy scene before him. He wants to see sawmill men in 'em, but he'll settle for valley tourists. Tollmer burned me out. He's the one who figured I'd sell if that happened. Not King Kaner. Kaner said for me to look around.

Those words, "Look Around," could have many meanings, Madera thought as he skirted his homestead and rode the banks of Big Creek toward the gorges that fed the stream.

Look around. Madera looked as he rode, and perhaps for the first time he was seeing this homestead with clear eyes.

Except for the flat where the house had stood, and the ten acres of apples, and another forty for hay, the rest was timberland, rough and blocky where the gorge that fed Big Creek tapered down to these bottomlands. His father had never thought of lumbering except for cutting trees they might use. To him this upper section of their homestead had been almost worthless.

Madera rode it now, and he saw yellow pines that sought the sky. Giants, ten feet through. But they were nothing compared to the timber that lay on the steeper slopes in front of him. Some of the mammoth pines, he noticed, were close above the brawling waters of Big Creek.

"Wouldn't take many," he spoke the words aloud in the silent majesty of the forest, "to dam this creek right about here. Back the water up into the gorge. Let the overflow feed the Bear after it sets a waterwheel rolling—"

Madera wondered if this was what King Kaner had meant when he'd said, "Look around." It could be done here, and the apples from an orchard that a boy had remembered could still be enjoyed by his own sons, sometime in the future—

Through all these thoughts a phantom memory came to disturb Madera. It was the remembered sound of hoofs crashing underbrush. Something about that recalled sound caught at his mind now. Something alien. Something he should be able to lay a finger on, and then slowly the answer came to him! *No Sierra man would make that much racket getting through the forest!*

Madera started to breathe fast, and he turned his mount back downstream with electric impulses driving him along. Any man who wouldn't ride the aisles of the forest with greater ease than the one who had shot King Kaner would leave a trail a mile wide and a yard high for any Sierra man to follow.

"Move along, bronc!" Madera almost

sang the words. "Move along. Mehbe we're going to learn a heap more than we know now before the day's done."

Again he skirted his homestead, and its sounds of hammer and saw. Shadowlike, he drifted downward toward the Bear, wondering how Kimbro would go about making his search. Danger rode with him, for Madera knew grimly that the next time the sheriff sighted him he would shoot first and do his talking afterwards. It made him acutely conscious of his own lack of a gun. A manhunter stalking a manhunter needed a Colt in his hand, and there was just one place now where he might get one.

Madera studied the road for signs of life, and found it empty. He cut quickly across, and rode a giant arc that dropped him down toward the Bear, a half hour later. From the edge of the forest he studied King Kaner's Lodge that looked out over the Lake. Massive as the man himself, he had kept adding to it, until now the building sprawled vastly over a half acre of grounds. Wide galleries, wide halls, majestic rooms. There were probably two dozen of them in the house, perhaps more, and in one he might find Kathy—

He left his mount, and made a quick run for a shadowed porch, and his nerves were edged with disgust. Playing fugitive was the last thing he'd counted on doing.

SILENT as a ghost, he moved along the porch and then a door opened quietly almost beside him. Madera stopped, one fist cocked, and then in the duskiess of the room he made out Kathy, and the girl's lips were smiling at him. Her hands came out in an unconscious gesture of affection and relief.

"Johnny," she whispered. "Johnny, come in. I've been watching, hoping you'd come—" Her voice broke into something close to laughter. "You should see the poor sheriff's jaw. He looks like he's got the mumps!"

"And he's probably madder than a bear with a sore paw," Madera felt his own spirits lifting a little. "I came to borrow a gun," he added, and his voice was hard as flint again. "There's a trail to follow, Kathy, and I may need more than my fists at the end of it."

The girl nodded understandingly. "You think you can backtrack the man who bushwhacked dad?" she asked.

"Yes," Madera said, and he watched the girl turn swiftly to a locked cabinet across the shadowy room. Her hands clicked a key in it, and the dull shine of rifles and Colts glimmered as the door swung open. She handed him a gunbelt and Colt, and picked a rifle from the cabinet.

"No," Madera shook his head. "If this ain't enough, I won't be needing anything."

"The sheriff wouldn't even listen when I told him that I'd also heard a horse crashing off through the trees after dad was shot," she said. "He wants you, Johnny," her voice broke a little, "and you alone! Don't let him take you," her voice was really breaking now as she came close against him and he caught the faint, clean pine scent of her wildfire hair. "Ride east away from these mountains into Nevada. Write me, and I'll follow wherever you go."

"Your dad?" Madera asked hesitantly.

"He's still alive, but the company doctor we keep at the mill doesn't hold out much hope. I sent Handy to Madera with two horses and orders to ride them into the ground. There's a specialist in the town who may be able to operate. The bullet, our doctor tells me, is lodged in dad's back, close to his spine. And dad's an old man—"

"He'll pull through!" Madera told the girl, and his big hands gripping her arms seemed to bring strength into her. "He'll pull through, and so will we. If your dad wakes up, you tell him I looked around.

Tell him just that and he'll know what I mean. Now I'm going to hit that trail, Kathy," his amber eyes were blazing down into the girl's face, and his voice softened until it was almost a whisper. "Maybe it's goin' to stretch back five long years!"

Madera dodged down to the road at the point where King Kaner had fallen, and took the time to let his eyes coast upward through the pines. And an eye that hadn't lost its keenness for woods lore found the copse of brush behind which the bushwhacker had sat his mount. It was the only clear aisle that would give him a straight shot at a passerby on the Lake road.

He urged his mount up-slope, riding openly now, for he was remembering what Kathy had told him as she'd walked with him back to his horse.

"Kimbrow headed for Harry Tollmer's camp to deputize his workmen and send them into the hills to search for you. He wouldn't trust any of our millmen," she'd added with satisfaction. "He knows they'd help you instead of hunt you. But Tollmer's men—"

"Tollmer's men," Madera had grinned at her, "probably couldn't find their own hats on a dark night. I hope they headed up toward my place."

"So do I," Kathy had said grimly. "So do I. The boys I sent up there this morning aren't going to take kindly to a bunch of greenhorns traipsing around!"

And a greenhorn to the mountains had made the trail that started behind the copse of buck-brush Madera had marked out. The cut of the horse's scrabbling hooves had gouged deep grooves through pine needles and sand beneath them. The hurried rush of the mount up the slope from the lake was easy to read. Madera followed the trail higher and higher until it started to circle back toward the upper end of the Bear.

He paused to let his mount rest, for they

were high now, with the Bear looking not much larger than a blue diamond set in a circlet of silver sand. Shadows were streaming in through the trees as the sun dipped low beyond Saddleback Hump. Dusk would be coming on soon, and the knowledge hurried him along a trail that was harder and harder to follow, as the panic in the man who had done the shooting eased a trifle. His pace had slowed, and the sign was plain no longer.

The trail was dipping downward now, following a straight course toward the head of the Bear. *A pigeon always flies home*, Madera thought, and his face was bleak as the visage carved on some ancient Roman coin as he realized where this trail was leading him. Down there, still far below him, lay the toylike shapes of new cabins, with one looming larger than the rest—Tollmer's own cabin.

The dusk was seeping in like some dark tide to blanket the land and Madera left his tired mount in the pines close to the lake, where the lapping of the water would hide any sound the horse might make. On foot now, a giant shadow amongst the shadows, he moved to the rim of Tollmer's clearing. The cabins already erected were all on the other side of it, but there were foundations and piles of peeled logs in front of him.

He moved on into Harry Tollmer's cabin. It was finely furnished, and an alcove across from him showed a desk and chair.

Between twin ink wells at the back of the shining desk was something that also shone. A glimmer of steel, and a polished bit of deerhorn, with a silver button on the tip of it that glittered up at him like a pale eye.

MADERA Johnny Payne straightened, and it was hard for him to believe his own eyes. In front of him was the knife that Nate Grimm had brought into his hand when he'd realized

his battle that long-ago night was lost.

No man, looking for that knife, would ever expect to find it exposed in this fashion, for only a devious mind would realize the advantage of the obvious.

"Tollmer," Madera muttered, "I guess you've been a heap sight smarter than I figured." He'd shot King Kaner because he'd realized that the lumberman might be a stumbling block to his gaining control of Big Creek.

Something was scorching out on the kitchen stove, but Madera paid no attention. He picked up the knife, hefted it, and turned toward the alcove door with it gripped in his hand as he heard the faintest sound of a rug slide over the polished floor.

A gun flared in the near-dark of the big room, and Madera felt the rake of a bullet across his ribs.

"I knew you'd come here," Harry Tollmer said sibilantly. "I always give the other man credit for the brains he's got, and I had it figured you'd find my trail."

Nate Grimm's knife was in Johnny's right hand, and he could drop it and reach for the holstered Colt at his thigh before a bullet found some vulnerable part of his body. A body, he was suddenly conscious, that was big enough for even a greenhorn to target. His hand was out, and he lurched forward as the Colt thundered a second time. A blow that was the hardest he'd ever taken in his life smashed Madera in the left shoulder, but momentum carried him on forward.

"Fall, damn you, fall!" the cry on Tollmer's lips rose like a scream. He was crouched in the center of a Navajo rug that was the red of the blood that had started to dye Johnny Payne's shirt, and Madera, slipping forward to the floor, caught the tasseled edge of it, and pulled with some of his last strength. Tollmer's feet left the floor, and the room shook as he struck on his back.

The room seemed to be growing darker

than it had been, and Madera knew that his left arm was useless. But he still had his right. He pushed himself across Tollmer's legs, and sledged his right toward the blur of the man's face, and felt his knuckles bite satisfyingly through soft flesh.

"Don't!" Tollmer's voice was thin, terror-filled now. "Don't Payne! Don't make me pay—"

"You'll pay," said Madera thickly, "for five years you cost me, and for shooting the next best man on this lake to my dad." He slugged his fist with a terrible weariness into the man's face. "You palmed that knife Nate Grimm dropped. You were close enough to us that night to hear him talk about Big Creek, and you guessed what a man could do that controlled its flow. You saw your chance when the fight ended to put me away—mebbe for keeps." He hit Tollmer again, and the white of the man's face was smudged with blood now. Grimly he drew back his arm, but this time a hand caught it.

"Ain't you ever satisfied, Payne?" the voice was the sheriff's, and it was strangely affable now. "Hell, I've heard enough to make me admit I was wrong. And I'll do it in front of a judge if that'll make you feel any better. Seemed a little peculiar to me when Tollmer got tired riding so soon this afternoon. Like maybe he'd been on a horse earlier in the day. I give him time enough to git back here, and then I followed along."

Madera crawled to his feet, and the grin on his face was sardonic. "Once in a road camp out along the coast," he drawled, "we found some of these here chameleons, them critters that change color."

"Now, boy," said Kimbro, "you want me on your side, don't you?"

"I don't want a damn thing," said Madera savagely, "except to see this Tollmer behind bars."

"He'll get that," Jack Kimbro promised, and his own voice was the grim voice of the law now. "Mebbe more when we

start followin' his backtrail. Meantime, you need a doctor to look at that shoulder, and from the sound of the buckboard I heard hightailin' it along the Lake road awhile ago, you'll find the best one in this country up at Kaner's Lodge. Think you can ride that far, Payne."

"Farther than that," Madera said, "for Kathy."

"My horse," said the sheriff, and he touched Tollmer delicately with the toe of his boot, "is out front."

Riding the sheriff's palomino was like riding the wind. Madera savored the scent of the evening pines, and it had never seemed so sharp to him.

The hoofs of the palomino made a racket in the yard, and from the lighted house he saw a girl come running—a girl he hoped who would always be eager to welcome him.

Kathy met him in the yard, in a flash of lamplight that came from the open door behind her.

"Johnny," she whispered, "Johnny, come on in. We'll fix your arm. I'll get horses for you—"

"I don't," said Madera Johnny Payne with the utmost satisfaction he'd felt in years, "have to worry about runnin'. Kathy, this is home, and I'm here to stay, if—"

"Dad's going to live," the girl said. "The first thing he asked, after the doctor got through operating, was whether you'd 'looked around.' I told him you had, and darned if he didn't roll over and go right to sleep. Johnny, what were you two talking about this morning?"

Madera drew a deep breath, and his smile was not the smile of a wounded man. After all, he still had one good arm, and that was enough to hold a wildfire girl. "Why," he said, "about apple orchards. Someday maybe we'll have some—"

"Johnny!" Kathy's hand closed his lips, but he pushed her fingers aside with a grin—"who'd like to eat 'em!"

(Continued from page 94)

crew looks plenty tough, an' they sure act suspicious, but I guess they don't hanker to ride up to the wagon with our whole crew standin' around. They follow me and we go down the draw and start gatherin' the steers.

We get a bunch gathered and two of Vance's crew take them out of the draw, while the rest of us split up, combing the brush for more. I'm busy with two especially ornery ones, and when I finally get them out in the open, I suddenly realize I'm all alone. I drop the steers and ride for the wagon.

Steve's smart, all right. He picked up the two owlhooters that drove the bunch out of the draw first. Then the boys went into the brush and got the other four one by one. There wasn't a shot fired. Those jaspers wasn't expecting anything but help from our punchers when they rode up to them in that heavy brush, an' Steve

said later that takin' their guns was plumb easy.

The sheriff came along about thirty minutes later with a posse. It seems like while this crew of Vance's was waitin' around town, they just couldn't resist robbin' the Wells Fargo express office. But I kind of wish there hadn't been all that reward money out for 'em. I kind of figured Steve would make a good ramrod.

But when I asked him, he says, "Thanks a lot, Bill, but I got other plans. There's a gal over in Cisco. . . . Well, we want to get hitched an' I can take my split of this reward money an' buy a little place of my own."

Well, he's sure excited an' I can't say as I blame him. I can remember. . . . Aw, hell, that's all I can do any more—remember. I think I'll buy Doc's place an' sell mine up in the canyon. I'm gettin' too damned old for them winters up there. Besides, maybe Steve'll change his mind.

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 75)

1. If the man took off his hat and waved it as indicated, you should avoid him. This is Western sign language to keep away.

2. True. The expression "turned the cat" is used in reference to a horse which has stepped into a hole and fallen.

3. The slang meaning of the term, "taking up a homestead," means being thrown from a horse.

4. False. In the language of the cowpoke, a "short-trigger man" is an outlaw.

5. True. In Texas a law was once passed prohibiting the use of the running iron.

6. The Western slang term, "reaching for the apple," means reaching for the saddlehorn.

7. False. The expression "put his saddle in the wagon" means that a cowpoke has been fired from his job.

8. Probably you would be most likely to hear the word, "pitching," substituted for bucking in the state of Texas.

9. If the ranch boss sent you on a "junta," quite likely you would do some talking. A

"junta" is a meeting. From the Spanish word.

10. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "lamb licker," you should return with a shepherd.

11. You should mount an "Indian broke" horse on the right side.

12. "Hen fruit stir" is pancake batter.

13. False. A "gun shark" is a person who is a crack shot.

14. True. "Gelding smacker" is a Western slang term meaning a saddle.

15. A "dogger" is a bulldogger.

16. False.

17. True. The expression, "chinning the moon," is used in reference to a horse which rears up on its hind legs and paws the air.

18. If the ranch boss gave you permission to "calf 'round," this would mean you could loll about, be lazy.

19. True. A "breaking pen" is a small pen used for the purpose of breaking horses.

20. The Western slang term "bounce" means to turn.

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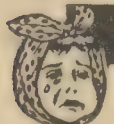
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 74)

ain't a gonna do nothin' now any more, 'ceptin' what I tell you."

Rafe said, "I don't want to go to jail, Cal."

"I know you don't wanta go to jail," scolded Cal. "Nobody wants to go to no jail. But I ain't killin' you jest to oblige you, neither. . . . Gilly, gather up them guns. Get them hosses around and see if you kin wake up them *hombres*."

Gilly Bower moved as if in a-trance. He did not look at Cal Beach.

Rafe said, "I'd jest as soon you shot me, Cal. They'll hang me sure." His face was stark, brooding.

"Shoot yuh! Shoot yuh!" said Cal. He was almost yelling. "People goin' around shootin' people. I'm tired of it, yuh hear? Tired of it! Git on that cayuse! Go ahead, git on! Make them other *hombres* git on, Gilly, damnit!"

They were all on the horses, their feet trussed beneath the bellies of the animals. Cal felt weak, leaning against the rock holding his Colt. Gilly was stringing the broncs together, so they couldn't make a break, trailing the line to his own saddle. Gilly climbed aboard his horse and looked at Cal. He said timidly, "Okay, Cal. You comin' along?"

"Hell, yes," said Cal. He forked the mustang.

Gilly dropped back beside him. He said, "Uh— Cal. I lost my head. I folded up, Cal."

"Git ahead," mumbled Cal. "You got some talkin' to do to the law your own self. You kilt that Mex."

Gilly shook his head. "I'm— I'm gonna make you foreman, Cal. Genuwine foreman of Box K."

Cal said, "I'm takin' you in to Fatso." Now he was suffering again, thinking of all of them. They sure would hang old Rafe. Gilly would get his, too. He just couldn't bear thinking about it.

GUN NAME

(Continued from page 90)

He saw the black thicket ahead, but there was no avoiding it. He tried to yell warning. The coach smashed down, bored into the growth, bucking and shuddering as the terrible momentum of its slide pounded against the stubborn cedars.

McClary lay dazed, uncomprehending, not realizing that the snow was soft under his face. Cedar brake lay thick about him.

Men's voices reached him and he began to get to his feet. It hadn't taken long to come down that thousand yards of slope. But had old Furness. . . .

"That damned McClary!" It was Red Curville's shrill angry voice. "His brother was with the Canyon bunch. I saw him. They got Hemper free. They plugged Will Furness."

For a moment McClary stiffened, and then the fight drained out of him. He was McClary, always had been.

"Get me to a fire, somebody," old Furness suddenly yelled. "I'm freezing."

McClary shoved toward the stage-coach. Red Curville saw him and fumbled for a gun. Chris Fenton stood watching with astonishment.

"Those McClarys," Curville began again. "An outlaw tribe if ever I—"

"Nice ride, son," old Furness husked from inside the coach.

Fenton broke it, then. He stomped forward and with his three sons lifted Furness from the coach. But Furness rolled his head to stare at McClary.

"Used judgment and had the guts to back it. Might even make a good deputy . . . one with judgment. We'll talk that over." A sly softening touched the sheriff's pain-pinched eyes. "Next time you're over to see Shirley . . . we'll talk it over."

Red Curville swore raggedly, but McClary saw the gun sag. He grinned and limped after the Fentons as they headed for the ranch house. And fire. And a new respect for a McClary.

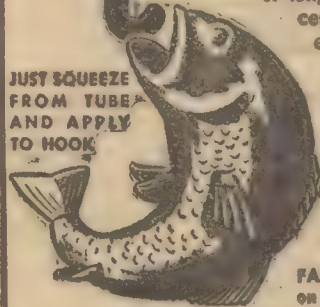
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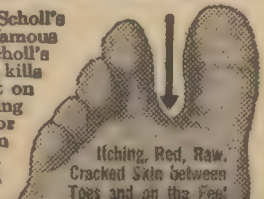
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Dr. Scholl's SOLVEX

(Continued from page 95)

It's appropriate because Luke seems just that. He's a drifter, however, with a love of people and a kindly, observant eye, and one who can put his impressions into a touching poetic form. We called Luke a bard, and that's just what he seems to be; what else was a bard but a man who wandered and noted the sadness and the joys of people along the way, and put that joy and sadness into poems and songs to touch the hearts of his very inspirers? On the first side, Luke touches in words and hymn-like song the subject of the death of a loved one. In simple, sturdy lines, he traces the saddened reactions of the bereaved, tracing the while his hopes that he soon will be reunited with the lost one *Beyond The Sunset*. On the reverse side, Luke takes us to a little church where we share the tragedy that has befallen a mother and father through the death of their child. Luke helps us see with compassion the universal mystery of the "going-before" of a loved one and outlines the bit of bittersweet joy that faith in God leaves one at such a time. This is an unusual record and a great one. Rarely have such moving experiences been imprisoned in the grooves of a lowly phonograph record. Here is a memorable disk

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(Continued from page 105)
"The road ahead looks clear for you," he told the cowman. "But they sure made a mess of things."

Wilson waved a dismissing hand. "Hell, a man don't appreciate what he's got till he's fought for it."

Rand thought about that. It was the first time he had ever fought for anything. He knew Wilson was right. He had fought for a friendship and nothing had ever meant more to him. He was composed now in his decision.

Mary came out of the bedroom, "It seems to be only a flesh wound. But we can't be sure."

"He needs a doctor," Rand said. "So does Fred." He looked at her hungrily, trying to drink enough of her to last him.

"Yes, but I'll go, Rand," Mary said. "There's no need for you to show yourself in town."

Then Wilson laughed. "Blazes, you don't either one have to go. Rand, you'd pass Joe Swetzer's on your way. Stop and ask him to go on. Tell him you've got to get back to tend the wounded. Tell him to send the sheriff out. I know our lawman. He'll believe you're my second cousin from the East if I say so."

Rand grinned. "That's the ticket. And I'll get going."

He left them like that and wanted to remember Wilson's continuing grin and Mary's pleased eyes.

It was all clear in his mind. There was as much guilt in trying something and being prevented by force as there was in going through with it. Guilt was not a thing a man put down by reasoning his way out of it. A man had to work it off in more than an hour of violent gunfire.

An hour later he passed a lamplit ranch-house that would be Swetzer's. He kept going. He wanted to send the doctor himself. After that he wanted to see the sheriff.



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In addition to the sensational Kendex nylons, you will have a complete line of glamorous lingerie, beautiful robes and housecoats plus a complete line of Kentcraft mens' hosiery guaranteed for one full year. Any pair or pairs of men's hose that does not give satisfactory wear within one year of purchase will be replaced FREE!

NATIONALLY ADVERTISED

Kendex will spend over \$350,000.00 in 1950 to tell millions of readers of the advantages in buying from you. Almost every issue of Good Housekeeping, Saturday Evening Post, McCall's, Women's Home Companion and Ladies' Home Journal carry our advertising in addition to many others. Kendex has advertised in Life, Look, Collier's, etc. Awarded Good Housekeeping Seal. Thousands of orders are shipped daily from coast to coast.

EVERYTHING GIVEN FREE

Risk nothing! Mail coupon and we will send you, free and prepaid, complete money-making outfits including sample nylon stocking, samples of lingerie, robes, housecoats and men's hose fabrics and everything you need to immediately start making money. Complete outfits become your property even if you don't send any business. Simply write orders, we deliver and collect. Advance cash plus huge bonus. No money or experience needed. Mailing the coupon is all you need to start on the road to a 52-weeks-of-the-year high paying business of your own. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

**FREE
NYLON
STOCKING**

KENDEX CORP., BABYLON 49, N. Y.



FOUR MONEY-MAKING LINES

- WOMEN'S NYLON HOSIERY
- GLAMOROUS LINGERIE
- HOUSECOATS—ROBES
- MEN'S HOSIERY

MAIL
TODAY

NOTHING
TO
PAY

NO
OBLIGATION

**KENDEX CORP.
BABYLON 49, N. Y.**

Date _____ 1950

Send me, free and prepaid, everything I need to make money as a Kendex dealer, including sample stocking etc. There is nothing for me to pay now or later and I am under no obligation in accepting your money-making outfits.

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Address _____

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Best tire value starts **INSIDE**...with **B.F. Goodrich**

"RYTHM RIDE" ... GIVES YOU MORE SAFETY, COMFORT, MILES



EMMETT KELLY

World's most famous circus clown, says:

"LOOK INSIDE FOR INSIDE PROOF"

"Under the Big Top the secret of top performance is teamwork," says Emmett Kelly. "And a look inside a B. F. Goodrich Silvertown shows that's true of tires as well."

Look inside a B. F. Goodrich tire yourself: Note how the cords are precision spaced in live rubber with no cross-threads! That's why they flex in rhythm (see below) to give you the best tire value—"Rythm Ride!"

Yet "Rythm Ride" tires cost no more. See your B. F. Goodrich retailer for convenient terms and generous trade-in!



IF YOU CAN TELL WHICH CIRCUS RIDERS ARE BEST, YOU CAN TELL WHICH TIRE IS BEST:



1 Every tire has thousands of cords that flex as you ride. In most tires, these cords are hampered by *non-working* cross-threads. Result: They're *out of rhythm* like the bareback rider and clowns above.

2 B. F. Goodrich tire cords have *no cross-threads* to hinder their action. They work in *rhythm* like the circus stars above. Carry impact from one to another, smother road shock, reduce wear, cushion bumps.

3 Most tire cords are bunched and gapped by slender cross threads. Weak spots, "slacker cords", overworked cords result. BFG cords, instead, are sealed in live rubber, with uniform spacing and tension.

4 Look inside—then decide. Only B. F. Goodrich can give you "rhythmic-flexing cords" in every tire for every need. See your BFG retailer. Buy now. The B. F. Goodrich Company, Akron, Ohio.